Nature's embrace

A guide to youth exchanges for mental well-being

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Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all terms used in the masculine grammatical form throughout this publication refer equally to the feminine grammatical form.

Editorial Information

Handbook: Nature's embrace A guide to youth exchanges for mental well-being is the result of the collective work of the NEXUS partners, coordinated by the youth organisation Sintagora. Each partner contributed valuable insights from their local and/or national context, target groups and project experience.

Authors' contributions: Conceptualisation; preparation of the original draft; literature review; writing and editing in Croatian, Serbian and English.

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Alongside the theory, we've packed this manual with practical tools like checklists and reflection questions. The real value of this guide lies in its hands-on approach. Think of it as your ally in creating a safe, supportive, and transformative experience for young people.

This isn't a rigid, step-by-step recipe book. Every group is different, every location is unique, and every participant brings their own story. What you get here is a flexible framework – it's up to you to shape it in a way that best fits your needs and the unique dynamic of your participants.

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Introduction

Across Europe today, one in seven children and adolescents lives with a mental health challenge. The statistics are even more alarming for young women aged 15 to 19, where one in four has been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and suicide remains one of the leading causes of death in this age group. Behind these percentages lie feelings of anxiety and irritability that affect a third of all young people on a weekly basis.

Alarmingly, we are now facing a severe youth mental health crisis, with as many as one in five adolescents globally — or 20 % — living with a diagnosed mental health condition. Between 2010 and 2023, the rate of mental health difficulties among children and adolescents (aged 0–19) rose by 35.56 %. For the 15–19 age bracket, the spike was even steeper, reaching 41.55 %.

Why is this happening?

One of the key, yet often overlooked causes is rapid urbanisation. As we move into cities, a growing divide is created between people and their natural habitat.

This nature-deficit disorder directly contributes to the decline of young people's psychological well-being. That is why returning to nature — the core focus of this manual — is no longer just a lifestyle choice, but an essential tool for safeguarding the health of future generations.

It is estimated that by 2050, as many as 68 % of the global population will live in cities.

Richard Louv believes that children who do not spend time in nature pay a high price. He calls this nature-deficit disorder and warns that it is not just a matter of nostalgia, but a real health problem.

Louv directly links increased screen time and less time in the woods to the rise in obesity, depression, and ADHD.

For him, nature is not just a backdrop, but a crucial ingredient for a healthy childhood. He believes that this connection with nature can always be restored—whether in a local park or on a trip that needs to be neither far nor expensive.

Project NEXUS

Nature-based Experiential Youth Support

It is precisely from this need that the NEXUS project was born, aiming to create a bridge between nature and mental health. We focus on working with young people who are at risk of mental health difficulties, with the desire to offer innovative and practical tools that make youth work higher in quality and more human-centred. Through NEXUS, we do not just learn about nature; we learn how to use it to become more resilient, empathetic, and connected to ourselves and our environment.

At the heart of this manual lies a nature-based experiential approach.

What does this mean in practice?

Nature-based experience

means that activities and learning take place in or alongside nature (woods, parks, the sea, mountains), and that nature is used as an active tool for learning, connection, and personal development, rather than just as a backdrop for photos.

Experiential learning

means learning through experience $\rightarrow$ young people do not learn by listening or through theory, but through active participation, emotion, direct experience, reflection, and discussion about what they have gone through and felt.

Young people today live under the immense pressure of the digital world and the fast pace of modern life. An experiential, nature-based learning approach restores balance by reducing anxiety, boosting self-confidence, and offering a safe space where it is easier to open up about one's feelings.

Target Audience

Who is this manual for?

If you are a youth worker, educator, or organiser planning a youth exchange and you want it to leave a lasting impact, you are in the right place.
You do not need to be a therapist, a mental health expert, or an experienced mountain guide. You just need to be ready to plan thoughtfully, be fully present with your group, and trust that nature already does a massive part of the work on its own.

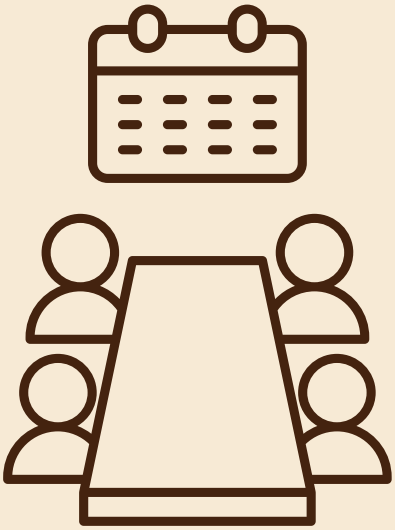
The manual follows the logic of any well-organised youth exchange through three simple yet essential steps:

1. **Planning and preparation:** How to choose a location, design a framework that safeguards mental health, and prepare the group beforehand.
2. **Activity implementation:** Concrete activities and tools that turn nature into a space for learning and connection.
3. **Follow-up and evaluation:** How to know if it worked, how to support participants after it is all over, and how to share the results.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

1.1. Defining Youth Exchange Objectives

Planning a youth exchange in nature can feel like a mountain of logistical tasks - from booking accommodation and arranging transport to drawing up activity schedules, handling countless errands, and managing endless paperwork. And yes, all of that needs to be done.



But before you open an Excel spreadsheet or start scouting for locations, it is worth pausing for a moment to ask yourself:

What do I actually want to happen?

This question is not about what will be done during the exchange, but what is essential for the participants to take home with them. Clear objectives are a practical tool that helps you make all those minor decisions that follow: from choosing the location and structuring the day, to deciding how much free time to leave and how to know, in the end, if the exchange was a success.

THREE LEVELS OF OBJECTIVES:

INDIVIDUAL

The focus is on the participant's personal experience (e.g. spending time in nature, a digital detox, stepping out of one's comfort zone).

What exactly do you want each participant to experience, feel, and learn during your project?

GROUP

Developing group dynamics through a culture of respect and support.

How should the group evolve throughout the youth exchange? How can you build a culture of mutual respect and support?

PROJECT

Concrete and measurable outcomes for the Erasmus+ report, Youthpass, and dissemination of results.

What tangible evidence of success do you need to prepare for reports and for sharing results within the local community, as well as at national and European levels?

These objectives need to be **SMART!**

SPECIFIC

MEASSURABLE

ACHIEVABLE

RELEVANT

TIME-BOUND

Example of a SMART objective – Group dynamics and a sense of belonging

By the end of the youth exchange, at least 85% of participants will report feeling accepted and safe within the group, which will be assessed through an anonymous evaluation questionnaire and the final group reflection circle.

How to turn a poor objective into a SMART one?

Example of a SMART objective – Connection with nature

Young people will spend more time in nature.

- It does not specify how much time.
- It is unclear how it will be achieved.
- There is no indicator of success.

During the youth exchange, participants will spend at least 6 hours per day in a natural environment through structured activities and free time, and at least 80% of them will report that spending time in nature helped them feel calmer.

SMART Objective Breakdown

- **[S]:** → What exactly are we doing? We don't just say "spend time," but specify: **through structured activities and free time in a natural environment.**
- **[M]:** → How do we measure success? We have precise numbers: **at least 6 hours per day** and a target of **at least 80% of participants feeling calmer.**
- **[A]:** → Is it realistic? Yes, because the project takes place at an outdoor location where it is easy to spend 6 hours outside through workshops, walks, and breaks.
- **[R]:** → Why does this matter to us? It directly links spending time in nature with mental health **("feeling calmer")**, which is the core of our project.
- **[T]:** → When will this happen? The timeframe is clearly defined: **"During the youth exchange"** (specifically during those X days of the project duration).

OBJECTIVES AND MENTAL HEALTH

A youth exchange is not therapy and should never be presented as such. However, it can be a rewarding space where young people:

- Develop an awareness of their own emotional needs
- Learn concrete tools for coping with stress
- Build relationships of trust in a safe environment
- Experience what it truly means to be part of a supportive community

In this context, an example of a SMART objective could be:

By the end of the youth exchange, at least 80% of participants will be able to identify and apply at least two stress-reduction techniques in a natural environment (e.g., conscious breathing, mindfulness walking, or keeping a reflective journal), which will be assessed through the final reflection and evaluation questionnaire.

This example covers all the SMART elements:

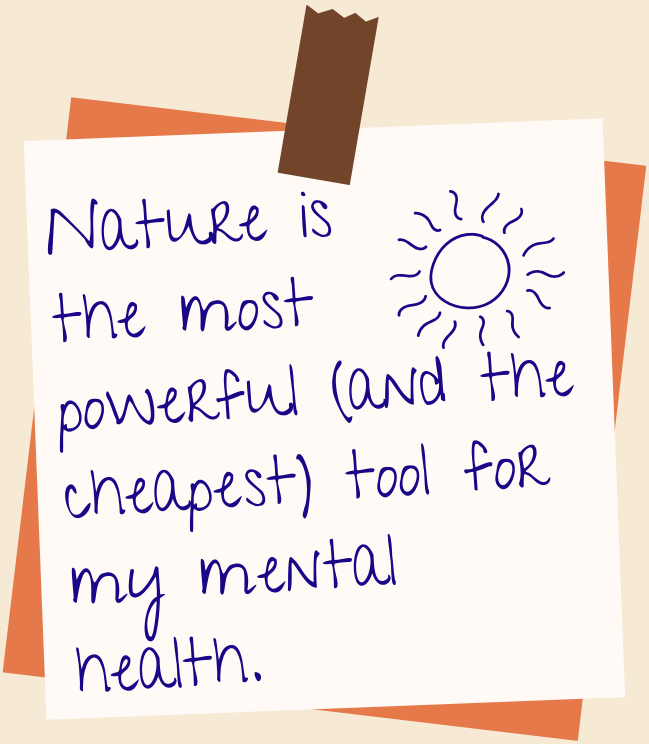
- Specific: → Stress-reduction techniques
- Measurable: → 80% of participants + two techniques
- Achievable: → Realistic within the duration of the exchange
- Relevant: → Directly linked to mental well-being
- Time-bound: → By the end of the youth exchange

1.2. Using Nature as a Classroom

You might already intuitively know that you feel better after a walk in the park or a weekend in the countryside. The good news is that you are not imagining it; it is a scientifically proven fact.

A systematic review by the University of Oxford (which encompassed 16 systematic reviews and 5 longitudinal studies) confirms that spending time in nature has measurable, positive effects on the mental health and well-being of children and young people—ranging from a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression to the enhancement of overall well-being.

What is particularly fascinating is that just 15 minutes of active time spent in green spaces, at least four times a week, is enough to trigger a significant improvement in mood and a drop in stress levels.

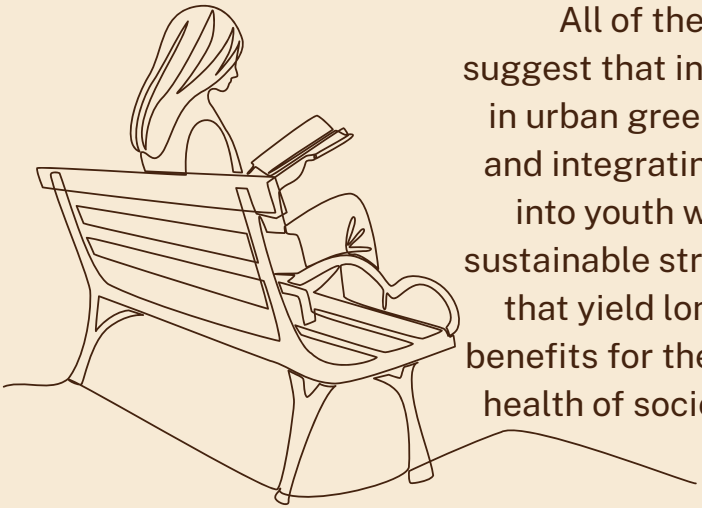


One of the longest-running studies on this topic tracked one million people over 28 years and revealed that children who grow up surrounded by green spaces have a drastically lower risk of developing psychiatric disorders in adulthood. Conversely, adults who had minimal contact with nature as children struggle more frequently with chronic anxiety and depression.

Furthermore, for young people with ADHD, nature and green spaces have proven to be exceptionally effective, as green environments reduce impulsivity and improve focus in ways that many standard approaches struggle to achieve.

Nature and Youth Development

It is also interesting to note that while almost any contact with nature benefits children under the age of 12, authentic and untouched wilderness has a significantly more powerful effect on adolescents than manicured parks or school playgrounds. Even the mere proximity of forests or meadows to educational institutions contributes to better socio-emotional development and lower rates of autism diagnoses in the community.



All of these data suggest that investing in urban green zones and integrating them into youth work are sustainable strategies that yield long-term benefits for the public health of society as a whole.

Why Nature Works?

The Theory Behind the Experience

I. Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

The first is Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). The idea is simple: there are two types of attention. The first is directed (intentional) attention, which we use at work, at school, and in front of screens. The second is involuntary (spontaneous) attention, which requires no effort.

When we exhaust our directed attention — which happens quickly — we become irritable, less efficient, and emotionally reactive. Nature is one of the few environments that activate involuntary attention. Gentle, engaging elements (often called "soft fascination") like watching clouds or listening to nature — such as the rustling of leaves or the flow of a river — allow our directed attention to rest and fully restore.

For any environment, including our own home, to have a restorative effect and support our mental regeneration, it must satisfy four conditions:

CONDITION	What does that mean in practice?	Question for the youth exchange organisers
1. **Being away**	A physical and mental escape from our everyday routine.	Does this location distance young people from their everyday worries?
2. **Fascination**	An environment that effortlessly holds attention (organic scenes).	Does the location have elements that naturally spark curiosity?
3. **Extent**	An environment that is rich and expansive enough to fully immerse ourselves in.	Is the space large enough for exploration and a sense of freedom?
4. **Compatibility**	A harmonious match between the space and what the person desires (peace or movement).	Does the location match the objective of the activity (e.g., does it offer the peace needed for reflection)?

The Four Factors of Restorative Environments – MENTAL REGENERATION

II. THEORY OF RECOVERY FROM STRESS (URLICH, 1983)

Stress is not just a feeling; it is a physical response accompanied by an accelerated heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and a cascade of hormonal changes.

Ulrich's research demonstrates that a natural environment, unlike an urban one, actively accelerates physiological recovery from stress. From an evolutionary standpoint, our bodies are hardwired to perceive nature as a safe environment, and they respond to it entirely differently than they do to concrete and traffic.

When you are choosing a location, planning the rhythm of the day, or scheduling moments of silence, keep these two theories in mind – they explain exactly why certain project decisions work beautifully, while others fall flat.

A micro-example from practice:

During a youth exchange in a mountainous region, organizers might notice that participants spontaneously start using the time after dinner for a quiet walk, without any instructions from the facilitators. It is precisely these informal moments that often become the most vital part of the mental regeneration process.

The group intuitively knows what it needs, and silence ceases to be a task, becoming instead a space to breathe.

1.3. PLANNING STEPS

Once a project is approved, a great youth exchange does not actually begin on the first day of the program. It starts weeks - and usually months - earlier, during the planning phase with partners, mapping out locations, and asking plenty of questions. This subsection guides you through the three crucial steps of planning: where you will be, how safe it is, and whether it is accessible to everyone.

- Checklists are a good reminder, but they are no substitute for common sense and talking to the group.
- You will resolve many of these points not by filling out a table, but through open dialogue with the participants.
- Short, simple questions like *"What do you need?"*, *"What are you worried about?"*, or *"What matters to you?"* can often yield far better answers and insights than any pre-prepared form.
- Inclusivity and safety are not built on documents alone; they are built through the culture of the group, starting from the very first online meeting.

1.3.1. Location selection

In programs focused on improving mental health, the location is never just a technical detail - it is the foundation of the entire experience. Nature functions as an active participant, and research consistently confirms that forests, mountains, coastlines, and even urban parks measurably reduce stress, elevate mood, and boost learning capacity.

A micro-example from practice:

During youth exchanges, organizers often notice that participants spontaneously share deeper personal reflections during informal moments spent in nature. Whether sitting together by a river, taking evening walks, or enjoying quiet breaks between sessions, these unprompted moments frequently become just as vital for the learning process and mental well-being as the planned activities themselves.

When looking for a good location for a youth exchange in nature, ensure that it is:

- **Far enough from everyday noise** – so that participants can truly "let go" of tension and be present, yet close enough to quickly reach civilization in case of need.
- **Diverse in terrain and character** – a combination of a forest path, open space, and a seating area in a circle provides flexibility for different types of activities.
- **Accessible in all weather conditions** – because if you planned activities solely for a sunny day, nature will not listen to you.

TIP:

Before making a decision, personally visit the location on-site – walk the trails, check the ground at different times of day, and talk to the local population.

Make sure to also contact the local forest or park authorities, as they often offer ready-made educational spaces and covered rest areas, as well as valuable information about the terrain that you won't find on any map.

LOCATION SELECTION checklist

- **Access and logistics**
- The location is accessible by public or organized transport.
- There is a clear address or GPS coordinates for emergencies.
- A parking lot or equipment storage space is available nearby.
- The distance from the participants' accommodation is reasonable (max. 30-45 min of travel).
-

Space and content

- There is a covered space for activities in case of rain.
- There is drinking water or it is available nearby.
- Toilets / sanitary facilities are available nearby.
- There is a space for outdoor group activities.
- The terrain is suitable for various physical activities.

Natural character

- The location offers authentic contact with nature (forest, water, meadow...).
- It is not overcrowded with tourists during the planned period.
- It features visually and sensorially interesting elements (different trees, sounds, scents).
-

Permits and cooperation

- The need for permits has been checked (use of nature parks, camping...).
- A local contact has been identified (owner, park management, tourist board).
- An alternative location plan is in place in case of need.

1.3.2. Risk assessment

This part of the planning is dedicated to tables in order to mitigate risks and responsibly care for the participants. Outdoor activities naturally bring uncertainty, and that is part of their value. The goal is not to eliminate every risk, but to identify the predictable ones and have a plan ready if something goes wrong.

Risks can be divided into several categories:

- **Environmental risks** → temperature, terrain, waterways, plants and animals
- **Activity risks** → physical demands of exercises, use of tools, working at heights
- **Group risks** → participants' health conditions, allergies, emotional vulnerability, bonding
- **Logistical risks** → transport, communication, emergency supply

Risk assessment is not a one-time task – it is drafted before the project, adapted on-site (according to weather conditions and the state of the group), and revised after the project.

For each potential risk, three questions are asked:

- **Probability:** What is the chance of this happening?
- **Severity:** How severe would the consequences be?
- **Prevention and response:** What can we do to reduce the risk or mitigate the damage?

A micro-example from practice:

A group of young people may express discomfort regarding a night activity in the forest. Instead of insisting on the program, facilitators should adapt the activity and provide an alternative form of participation.

RISK ASSESSMENT Checklist

Preparation before arrival at the location

- Health information has been collected for all participants (allergies, chronic diseases, mobility, medications) and specific needs related to mental health (phobias, panic attacks, therapy).
- The weather forecast for the entire duration of the youth exchange has been checked. Participants have been informed in advance about the terrain, physical demands, and weather conditions.
- Participants have been informed in advance about the terrain, physical demands, and weather conditions.
- An emergency contact list for all participants is available, and the location of the nearest medical facility is known and recorded.
- Protocols for medical emergencies and mental health crises (panic attack, emotional crisis, suicidal thoughts) have been defined.
- At least one person in the team has up-to-date first-aid training, and at least one has a grounding in psychological first aid.
- The mobile signal at the location and the surrounding terrain has been checked.

Equipment and safety

- The first aid kit is available and fully stocked; firefighting equipment and a functioning fire extinguisher are ready and accessible.
- Participants have been informed about the required equipment (comfortable footwear, layered clothing, sun protection, repellent).
- Sufficient quantities of drinking water are provided on-site.
- Plans for emergency and rapid response are in place (e.g., protection against heat stroke and hypothermia).
- The presence of poisonous plants, insects, or wild animals characteristic of the location has been checked.

RISK ASSESSMENT Checklist

- For water activities: regulations have been verified and a trained lifeguard is present; for activities involving tools: usage rules and supervision have been defined.
- For night activities: flashlights or headlamps are provided.
- An evacuation plan from the site is in place for emergencies.

Communication and supervision

- All leaders have functional mobile phones with local numbers; a system for counting participants during field activities has been defined.
- Participants know whom to contact if they get lost or feel unwell; a method for contacting sending organizations in case of an incident has been agreed upon.
- There is a plan B for every outdoor activity and a plan for adverse weather conditions.
- A leader on-duty system has been defined, including night hours.

Psychosocial safety

- Participants are familiar with the group rules and code of conduct; it has been clearly communicated that participation in all activities is voluntary.
- There is a physically and emotionally safe space for participants who need a break from the group.
- Leaders are informed about cultural differences that may affect group dynamics.
- There is a conflict management plan and a procedure in case a participant wants to leave the exchange.

Documentation

- Informed consent forms and permissions for data processing and photography (GDPR) have been signed; by parents/guardians for participants under 18 years of age.
- A written risk assessment is available to all leaders; an incident log has been prepared.
- Copies of all documents are kept in a safe place even after the project concludes.

1.3.3. Inclusivity and accessibility

A youth exchange in nature can be an empowering experience, but only if it is truly accessible to everyone. Inclusivity in the context of outdoor activities requires a bit more thought than in an indoor space, but none of that thinking is complicated. It is mostly about asking yourself: **What could be a barrier for someone?** and then focusing on resolving that obstacle before it becomes a problem.

A micro-example from practice:

A participant who has no prior experience staying in nature may feel uncomfortable about sleeping in a tent and being far from the city. A conversation with the facilitators about the possibility of gradually participating in activities at their own pace could be helpful in significantly reducing the feeling of insecurity.

Why?

- it normalises discomfort,
- demonstrates the importance of an individual approach,
- and dispels the assumption that nature is automatically comfortable for everyone.

Barriers in outdoor exchanges can be:

- **Physical** → terrain that is not passable for wheelchairs or crutches
- **Sensory** → activities that assume a certain level of hearing or sight
- **Cultural** → diet, clothing, religious practices
- **Cultural** → fear of unfamiliar spaces, trauma related to nature or group settings.

The good news is that most of these obstacles can be resolved with relatively simple adjustments if they are considered in advance.
The Erasmus Quality Standards explicitly emphasise that organisations should ensure that activities are accessible and inclusive for participants from different backgrounds and with various needs.

INCLUSIVITY Checklist

FPhysical accessibility

- The venue has been checked for accessibility for the specific group of participants prior to arrival.
- At least a part of the activities can be carried out for participants with limited mobility.
- An alternative activity is available for those who cannot participate in more physically demanding parts.
- Sanitary facilities are accessible to people with disabilities (or an alternative plan has been developed).
- Accommodation is physically accessible to all participants (stairs, bed height, spaciousness).
- Participants with special needs have been contacted in advance to jointly define the necessary adjustments.

Cultural and dietary inclusivity

- Dietary needs and restrictions of all participants have been collected (vegetarians, vegans, allergies, religious restrictions).
- Meals are adapted for all participants without the need for special requests on-site.
- The schedule of activities takes into account any religious practices (prayers, fasting, holidays).
- Cultural differences in approaches to the body, touch and personal space have been taken into account when designing activities.
- No activity assumes the same cultural references or experiences for all participants.

Checklista za INKLUZIVNOST

JLinguistic and communication inclusivity

- Instructions for activities are available in a language that all participants understand (most often English as a working language).
- Visual instructions or demonstrations are used to complement verbal instructions.
- Written materials (group rules, schedules, questionnaires) are available in an understandable language (it is recommended to include a visual representation where feasible).
- There is a person in the team who can mediate in case of language barriers.
- There is a person in the team who can mediate in case of language barriers.

Socio-economic inclusivity

- Aktivnosti ne pretpostavljaju da sudionici posjeduju specifičnu opremu ili odjeću – sve što je potrebno osigurano je ili jasno komunicirano unaprijed.
- Slobodno vrijeme i neobavezni izleti osmišljeni su tako da ne stvaraju pritisak zbog troškova.
- Sudionicima s manje mogućnosti osigurana je jednaka razina sudjelovanja bez vidljivog isticanja razlika.

Emotional and psychosocial security

- Participants are informed in advance about the type of activities – there are no surprises that could cause fear or discomfort.
- It is clearly communicated that participation in all activities is always voluntary.
- There is a trusted person whom participants can always approach, as well as a physically and emotionally safe space for those who need a break from the group.
- Leaders are trained in the basic principles of psychological first aid.

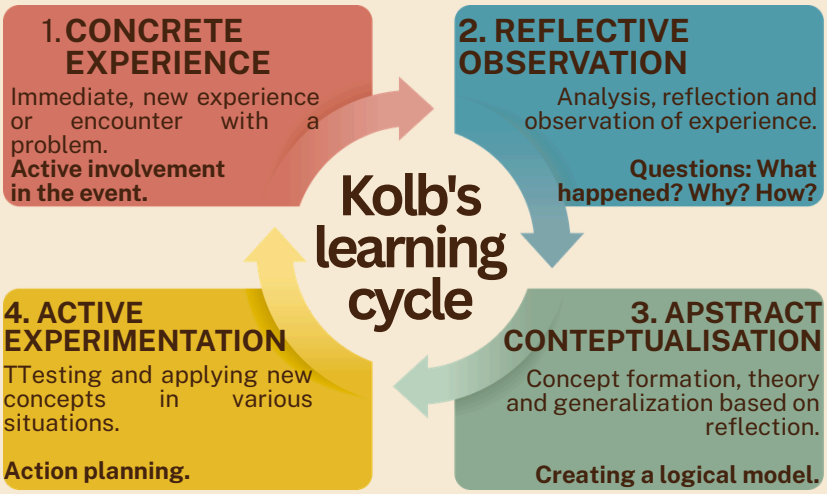
1.4. NFL methodology

NFL Non-formal Learning

Theoretical foundation: a brief introduction and review of Experiential Learning

Having defined how to create a safe and inclusive environment, it is important to understand how young people actually learn through experience in nature.

An American psychologist and educational theorist, David Allen Kolb defined learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The crucial idea is that reading or observing alone is not enough, but that learning requires active participation.



Kolb's experiential learning theory is proposed as a framework and pedagogical foundation for the design, implementation and evaluation of effective outdoor activities. The cycle emphasises that learning is a continuous process rather than a linear progression.

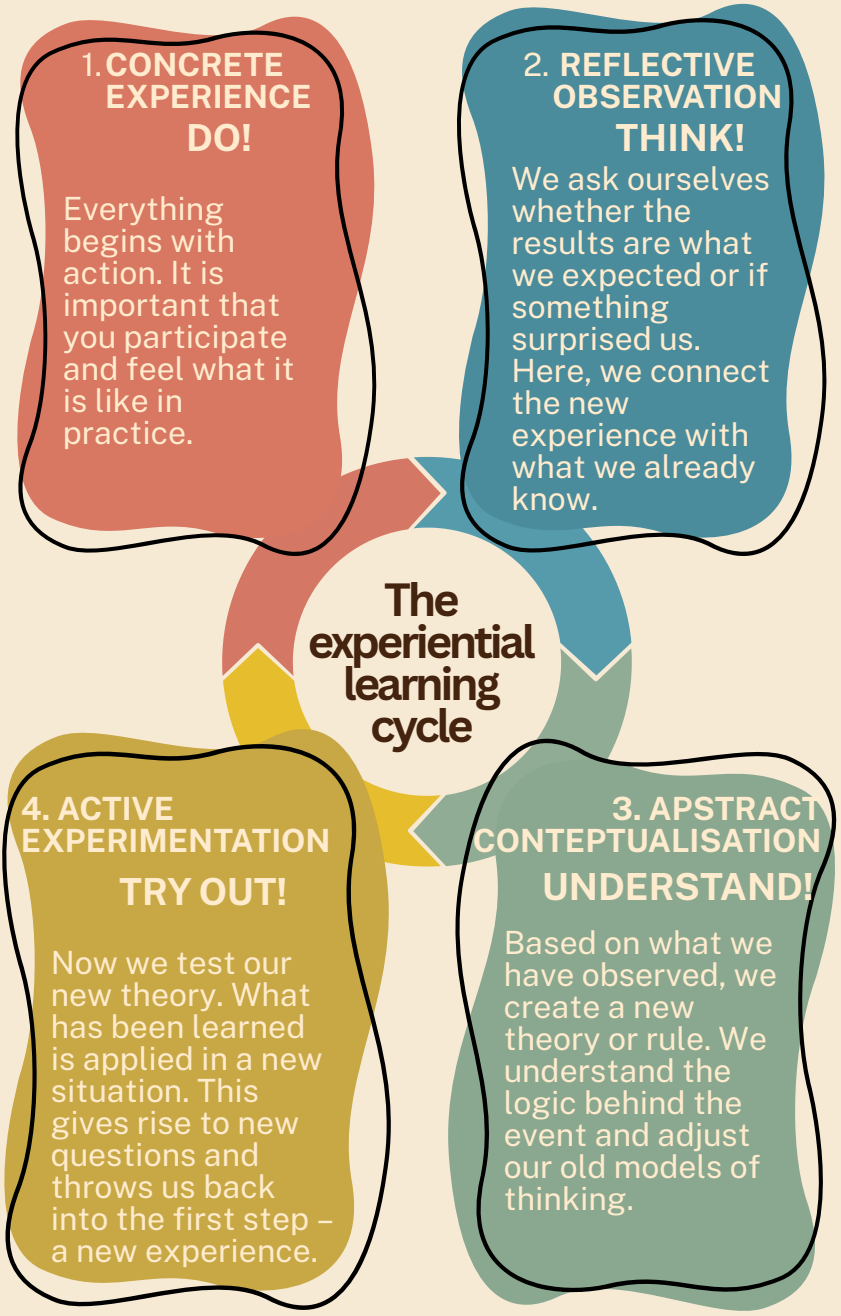
The connection of Kolb's cycle with outdoor learning

How do we actually learn? (The experiential learning cycle)
Learning is not a straight path, but a cycle. Each step in this cycle helps us turn what we have experienced into a lasting skill or wisdom.

Micro-example from practice:

After a team challenge in nature, participants might notice during reflection that it was not the task itself that frustrated them, but the way communication was handled within the group. This very conversation could become more important for learning than the activity itself.

How do we actually learn?



1.5. Youth involvement + safe and supportive environment

There is one thing that distinguishes a youth exchange from a guided tour: young people are not an audience – they are co-creators. And the sooner you accept this as an organiser, the better the exchange will be.

Youth involvement does not start on the first day of the programme. It does not even start with the first online meeting. It begins at the very moment you plan the project and ask yourself:

Who are the young people I am doing this for, and what do they actually need?

Youth involvement is not an addition to the project, but its foundation. When young people have the space to participate, express their needs and feel safe, the exchange becomes more than just a programme of activities – it becomes an experience where they truly connect, learn and develop.

When this space is lacking, we usually end up with a well-organised and high-quality programme that is designed for young people, but not together with young people.

Participation from the very beginning

Erasmus+ and the Council of Europe clearly emphasise the principle of active youth participation in all phases of the project – from identifying needs to evaluating results. In practice, this means that young people should be involved in the following steps:

Before writing the application:

- Needs assessment (survey, focus group, informal conversation) → what young people actually lack, what interests them, what troubles them
- Consultations on the theme and focus of the project
- Involving young people in designing activities

During preparation:

- Participation in defining group rules
- The opportunity to suggest activities or content
- Familiarisation with goals and expectations – in both directions

During the exchange:

- An active role in implementation (activity leaders, facilitators, documenters)
- Regular opportunities for feedback and programme adaptation

According to the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027, "meaningful participation" of young people is defined as participation that is informed, voluntary, has a real impact and is not merely tokenistic.

Ask yourself: Is your youth involvement like this?

Micro-example from practice:

A week before arrival, each participant sends a photograph of a place where they feel good into the group chat. When they meet in person, they already know something real about each other, so the first evening does not start from scratch.

Online meetings → more than logistics

Good preparation often determines how the group will function later during the exchange. It is recommended to run one intensive and high-quality online meeting.
Dedicate the first half of the meeting to logistics and getting to know each other, and the second half to expectations, laying the first foundations for group rules and emotional preparation before the trip.

Well-designed preparatory meetings serve three purposes:

1. Practical preparation → travel, accommodation, equipment, schedule

2. Getting to know each other → name, country, one or more things about oneself

3. Laying the foundation → what I am bringing, what I expect, what I am afraid of

For getting to know each other in an online space, short, informal methods work well: introducing oneself through a single photo from a mobile phone, "three truths and a lie", or simply: one word that describes how you feel ahead of this exchange.

As for expectations, do not just collect them and forget them. Write them down, share them with the group, and return to them at the end of the exchange. This is one of the most useful evaluation tools that exists, and it costs nothing.

Suggested structure for the first (online) meeting (60–90 minutes)

Part	Duration	Contents
Welcome and practical information	10 min	Who we are, where from, what awaits us
Getting to know each other	20 min	Short activity: name + one thing
Programme and activities	15 min	Overview of the programme, room for questions
Expectations and fears	20 min	Each participant shares: what I expect, what interests me
Group rules: initial suggestions	10 min	Joint beginning, finalized in person
Closing	5 min	What follows, how we stay in touch until then

Group rules → Create them together

One of the most common organizational mistakes is arriving with pre-made rules and reading the list at the first meeting. Participants nod their heads and forget everything five minutes later.
It works much better when rules are created through conversation right at the beginning of the exchange. Ask the question: **What do you need to feel safe and good in this group?** The participants' answers almost always cover everything you would have put on the list anyway, with the added bonus that every rule is now "theirs" rather than "yours."

Common themes that the group identifies on its own:

- Confidentiality ("what happens in the group, stays in the group")
- The right to say "no" without giving an explanation
- Active listening → no interrupting, no offering immediate advice
- Respect for diversity → of experiences, cultures, opinions
- The right to a break → physical and emotional
- Respecting the agreed schedule and arriving at activities on time
- Taking care of the shared space and equipment
- Responsibility for one's own belongings and personal boundaries
- Giving everyone space to participate and express their opinion
- Asking for help and support when we need it

Write the rules down in a visible place (flip chart, wall, shared document) and refer back to them during and at the end of the exchange.

The "Bora, Bora" rule

In international groups, people sometimes spontaneously start speaking in their own language. When someone says "Bora, Bora," it is just a friendly reminder to switch back to the shared language so that everyone understands what is being talked about. This simple rule helps ensure that no one feels excluded.

A micro-example from practice:

One participant writes: "The right to be in a bad mood without giving an explanation." A brief silence falls over the room, then the facilitator writes the suggestion at the top of the board, sending a clear message: you are accepted here even when you are not at your best. This "right to a bad day" rule → ends up being the most frequently mentioned one during the final evaluation.

Emotional safety → what does that actually mean?

You can have the perfect location, well-designed activities, and beautiful weather, and still end up with a group that doesn't open up or connect. The reason is almost always the same: people do not feel safe.

Psychological safety is defined as the feeling that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up, asking questions, making mistakes, or being vulnerable. In youth group work, this means creating an environment where no one has to fake it and everyone can be exactly who they are.

Emotional safety is not built through a single grand gesture, but rather through the accumulation of small moments:

- The facilitator is the first to share something personal, thereby encouraging others
- The group's reaction when someone says something unexpected or vulnerable - a smile, a nod, silence instead of a comment
- The way mistakes are responded to - with humor and support, not criticism
- Daily rituals that create a sense of predictability and continuity (morning energizer, evening reflection)

Research shows that psychological safety is one of the strongest predictors of group work quality; stronger than the experience, talent, or intelligence of the group members.

A micro-example from practice:

A facilitator whose activity is not going according to plan stops and tells the group directly: "I made a mistake in my estimation; let's figure out what to do next together." During the evaluation, several participants singled out that exact moment as the turning point for the group's openness.

Mutual respect in practice

Respect is one of those words that is easily written down as a rule, but difficult to live by in a group of 20 young people from 5 countries who have only just met.
A few concrete ways you can actively build respect:

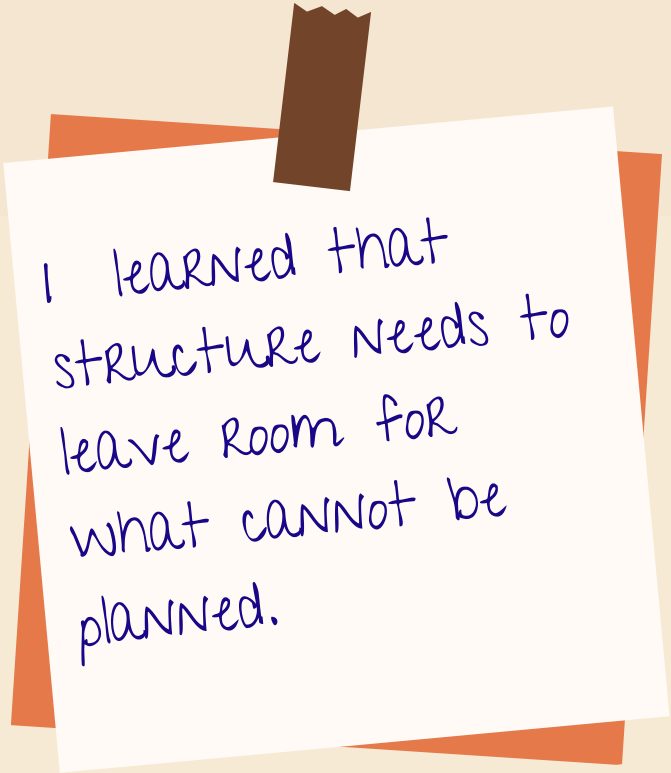
- **Cultural exchange without hierarchy →** every culture brings something valuable, none is "normal" while others are "exotic." Activities that explicitly celebrate this (cooking together, music, stories) help more than any speech about tolerance.

- **Boundaries are concrete →** instead of an abstract "we respect other people's boundaries," talk concretely: what do we do when someone says no, how do we ask before physical contact, what does active listening mean in practice.

- **Conflict is not the problem → poor conflict management is - in any g**roup working together for more than two days, friction will occur. Normalize this in advance. Tell the participants: if something is wrong, there is a way to address it.

A micro-example from practice:

A free evening, each country prepares one dish. While cooking, they talk about families and traditions; and this becomes the longest, most spontaneous, and most honest conversation of the entire exchange. The organizer writes down:



IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVITIES

How to integrate nature into activities for a supportive, inclusive and engaging experience ?

Not every activity in nature has to be spectacular to leave a lasting impression. Sometimes it is the simplest moments - sitting together in silence, walking along a forest path, or talking around a campfire - that participants remember most vividly.

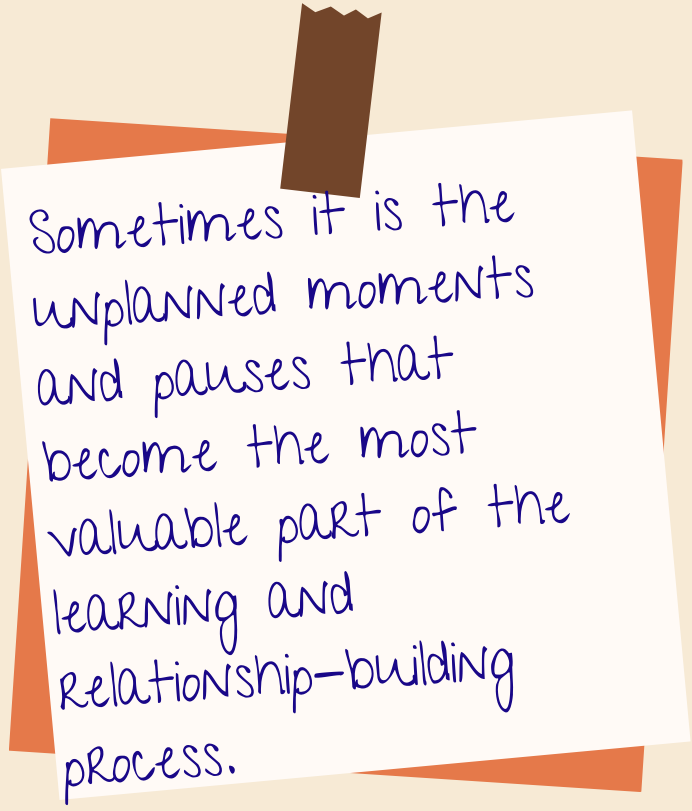
Nature itself does not "solve" mental health challenges, but it can provide a space where young people feel calmer, more connected, and more open to learning and reflection.

This chapter presents practical tools, methods and approaches for designing activities that promote:

- Active participation and a sense of safety.
- Emotional resilience.
- Stronger connections with both the group and the natural environment.

When working with young people, nature is much more than a backdrop for activities. It becomes an integral part of the learning process: slowing the pace, reducing distractions, encouraging mindfulness, and creating opportunities for authentic relationships. For this reason, the way youth workers and facilitators make use of natural environments can have a significant impact on the quality of participants' experiences.

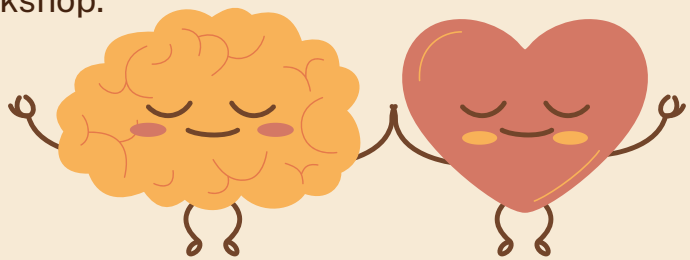
It is important to remember that the quality of the experience depends not only on a well-designed programme, but also on the facilitator's ability to listen to the group, adapt the pace of activities, and allow space for spontaneity.



2.1. Tools and Techniques for Enhancing Mental Well-being Through Nature

No single activity has a "magical" effect in itself. Rather, it is the creation of conditions in which young people feel calmer, more present, more connected, and freer to participate and express themselves that can make a positive contribution to their mental well-being.

The focus is not on how exciting or impressive an activity is, but on the experience it creates for young people and the opportunities it provides for participation, learning, and emotional safety. In many cases, a simple walk, moving together as a group, or a brief reflective exercise can have a greater impact than a carefully planned, complex workshop.



Before leading any activity, it is helpful to ask yourself:

- What do I want participants to feel, experience, or take away from this activity?
- How does this activity contribute to psychosocial well-being, group cohesion, and a sense of safety?

The way an activity is introduced, adapted to the needs of the group, and delivered in a way that fosters psychological safety is just as important as the activity itself.

Key factors for successful activities

- The pace of the activity and the level of structure provided.
- Allowing space for spontaneity.
- The facilitator's ability to respond to the needs of the group, which often determines whether participants feel relaxed, included and safe.

The tools and techniques presented in the following sections are organised into different categories of experiences. They are all connected by a common purpose: using nature as a setting that supports presence, connection, emotional safety and the mental well-being of young people.

Outdoor activities can play many different roles in youth work. For this reason, the activities in this chapter are organised not according to the type of task or the equipment required, but according to the experience they create for participants:

- **Calming and Awareness:** Activities that help young people slow down, become more present, and reconnect with their bodies and senses.
- **Energising:** Activities that increase energy levels, motivation and a sense of vitality.
- **Creativity:** Activities that encourage creativity, imagination and self-expression.
- **Reflection:** Activities that provide opportunities for reflection, meaningful conversations and processing experiences.

Note

The activities described in this chapter represent only a small selection of what the natural environment can offer in youth work.

Feel free to adapt, combine and modify them to suit your group, objectives and the methods you already use in your practice.

And the best part is?

You do not have to start from scratch. Many of the activities you already use with young people can be adapted to natural settings, gaining a completely new dimension through time spent outdoors, movement, shared experiences, and a different pace of learning.

If you already have experience in organising activities for young people:

these approaches can serve as inspiration for enhancing and expanding your existing programmes.

If you are just starting out:

these activities and methods can help you gradually develop a well-rounded youth exchange programme that promotes mental well-being, meaningful connections, and experiential learning.

2.1.1. Physical and Sensory Activities

Time spent in nature often supports mental well-being through the body, the senses and movement:

SENSORY EXPERIENCES:

The sounds of nature, the different textures beneath our feet, changing light, the rhythm of breathing while walking, or the feeling of the wind against the skin all help participants slow down, focus on the present moment and reduce tension.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Walking, hiking, games and moving together as a group can help relieve stress, increase energy levels and strengthen the sense of connection with both oneself and others.

Sensory experiences and physical movement often provide a natural way of regulating the nervous system. The emphasis is not on performance or physical fitness, but on the experience of being present, reconnecting with the body and developing a sense of vitality. For this reason, these activities can be particularly beneficial for participants experiencing mental fatigue, stress, sensory overload or difficulties with concentration.

Balancing calm and activity

Activities in nature that promote mental well-being do not have to focus solely on quiet, sensory or reflective practices. Well-being and emotional regulation are fostered not only through stillness but also through movement, rhythm, coordination and a sense of vitality.

For this reason, youth exchange programmes can also include more dynamic activities, such as:

- Team games.
- Physical challenges.
- Activities that encourage active movement and physical engagement.

Many young people experience relaxation, presence and emotional release through physical activity and the opportunity to release accumulated energy.

The activities in this category may range from calm and reflective to energetic and physically engaging, but they all share the same focus: the body, the senses, movement and being fully present in the moment. Their intensity should always be adapted to the needs of the group, the weather conditions and the physical abilities of the participants, with safety remaining the highest priority at all times.

Examples of sensory and calming activities:

MINDFULNESS WALKS:

Slow-paced walks during which participants focus their attention on their breathing, the rhythm of their steps, the sounds around them and details in the natural environment. These walks can help participants slow down and become more connected to the present moment.

The facilitator should observe: the group's pace, participants' level of concentration, and any signs of discomfort with silence.

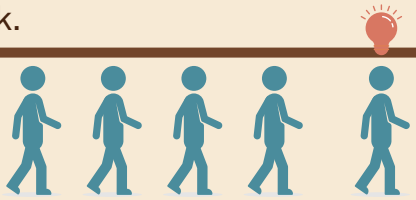
Adaptation: The duration and pace can be adjusted according to the group's energy levels and previous experience.

SILENT WALKS:

Walking together without conversation for a set period of time or along a particular section of the route. Silence often increases awareness of the surrounding environment, the body and one's own thoughts.

The facilitator should observe: how participants respond to silence and whether anyone requires additional explanation or support.

Adaptation: The activity may last just a few minutes or be incorporated into shorter sections of a longer walk.



GROUNDING EXERCISES:

Simple activities that direct participants' attention to their contact with the ground, their breathing or their senses, helping them develop a greater sense of stability and presence.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel safe and comfortable throughout the activity.

Adaptation: Activities should be brief, clearly explained and non-intrusive.

NATURE OBSERVATION:

Participants intentionally focus on details within the natural environment, such as the movement of clouds, the sounds of the forest, the surface of water, the shapes of plants or changing patterns of light. These activities can help participants slow down, reduce mental overload and develop greater awareness of the present moment.

The facilitator should observe: participants' level of engagement, whether additional guidance is needed to focus attention, and whether they feel comfortable with silence or a slower pace.

Adaptation: The activity may last from a few minutes to a longer observation period. Participants can express their experience through discussion, drawing, photography or a short reflective exercise.

SENSORY MAPPING:

Participants record or share what they notice through their senses - sight, hearing, smell and touch- helping them become more aware of both their surroundings and their own sensory experiences.

The facilitator should observe: participants' level of engagement and the different ways they perceive the environment.

Adaptation: This activity may include drawing, photography or verbal sharing.

MINDFUL BREATHING AND BODY SCAN IN NATURE:

Short breathing exercises and body awareness practices carried out while sitting or lying comfortably outdoors.

The facilitator should observe: participants' level of relaxation and any discomfort experienced by those who may find closing their eyes or remaining silent for extended periods challenging.

Adaptation: Participants should always be given the option to observe rather than take part fully, or to adapt the exercise in a way that feels comfortable for them.

BAREFOOT WALKING:

Walking barefoot for a short distance on grass, sand or another safe natural surface to enhance awareness of the ground and different textures.

The facilitator should observe: the safety of the terrain and participants' comfort throughout the activity.

Adaptation: Participation should always be voluntary, and the activity should only take place where the ground has been checked and is safe.

Examples of Movement and Physical Activation Activities

Mental well-being is supported not only through silence and calm, but also through movement, rhythm and physical activity. These experiences can help participants release tension, increase their energy levels and strengthen their sense of connection with the group.

Such activities may include:

- Walking and hiking.
- Moving together as a group.
- Team games and outdoor sports.
- Physical challenges and obstacle courses.
- Elements of martial arts or self-defence.
- Coordination and balance exercises.
- Activities involving rhythm and synchronised movement.

The emphasis in these activities is not on competition or physical achievement, but on experiencing movement, working together, developing a sense of vitality, and achieving emotional release through physical activity.

The facilitator should observe: the group's energy levels, participants' physical abilities, their sense of inclusion, and the balance between cooperation and competition.

Adaptation: Activities should offer different levels of intensity and allow participants to take part without feeling pressured to achieve a particular result or level of performance.

Guidelines for Delivering Activities:

When facilitating physical and sensory activities, it is essential to respect participants' individual boundaries and autonomy, without placing any pressure on them to achieve a particular outcome. Young people respond to these activities in different ways:

- **Silence versus conversation:** Some participants find silence calming, while others may feel uncomfortable or have a strong need to talk.
- **Stillness versus movement:** Some prefer quieter, more reflective activities, whereas others connect more easily through movement and physical activity.

Facilitator's note: Avoid trying to create a particular experience or expecting everyone to respond in the same way. Instead, acknowledge and respect the different reactions within the group. In many cases, a short, simple activity can have a greater impact than a long and highly structured programme.

A micro-example from practice:

During a silent walking activity, some participants may initially feel uncomfortable or have the urge to talk. After a few minutes, however, many begin to pay greater attention to the sounds around them, their breathing and their own walking rhythm. This often helps them feel calmer, more present and more connected to their surroundings.

2.1.2. Creative Activities in Nature

Creative activities in nature give participants the opportunity to express their experiences, emotions and perceptions in ways that do not always rely on words.

Creative Expression and the Power of Non-verbal Processes

In youth work, this can be particularly valuable, as some young people may find it difficult to talk openly about their feelings, especially in front of a group.

Spending time in nature often encourages imagination, spontaneity and a greater sense of freedom in self-expression.
In these activities, the focus is not on artistic achievement, talent or the aesthetic quality of the final product. What matters most is the process of creating, exploring and engaging with one's own experience.

Creative activities can help participants to:

- Slow down and notice the details of the natural environment.
- Express their inner experiences while developing a stronger sense of connection with their surroundings.
- Process emotions and experiences without feeling the need to explain or analyse them in detail.

Reducing Pressure Through Creative Expression

Creative activities are often effective because they provide different ways for participants to engage, reducing the pressure to express themselves verbally. Many young people find it easier to communicate their thoughts, emotions or experiences through:

- **Photography or symbols.**
- **Movement.**
- **Natural materials.**
- **Storytelling, rather than through a traditional group discussion.**

These activities encourage psychological safety, presence and active participation. They are designed for everyone – not only those who consider themselves "creative" – because the emphasis is on personal experience rather than the final outcome. By creating an environment free from judgement and pressure, facilitators can help participants feel more relaxed, confident and willing to take part.

Guidelines for delivering activities:

Activities in this category may be individual or group-based, calm or energetic, structured or completely open-ended. What they all have in common is the opportunity to foster:

- Self-expression and imagination.
- Engagement in the creative process.
- A deeper connection with nature through creative experiences.

Facilitator's Notes:

- **Adaptation:** Activities should always be adapted to the needs of the group, participants' comfort levels, their sense of emotional safety, and the weather conditions, as they take place outdoors.
- **Freedom of expression:** Make it clear from the outset that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to participate. Participants should feel free to engage in whatever way feels most comfortable and meaningful to them.
- **Inclusion:** Ensure there are opportunities for participants who may not feel comfortable taking part in traditional group discussions, allowing different forms of participation and expression to be equally valued.

Examples of creative activities:

LAND ART:

Creating temporary artworks using natural materials such as leaves, stones, branches, flowers or sand. This activity can help participants develop a sense of presence, collaboration and connection with the natural environment.

The facilitator should observe: participants' level of engagement, the dynamics of collaboration, and whether anyone feels pressure to produce an attractive final piece.

Adaptation: The activity can be completed individually or in groups, using either a simple prompt or a completely open-ended approach.

NATURE COLLAGES:

Arranging natural materials into pictures, patterns or symbolic compositions. This activity can help participants express emotions, experiences or associations without the need for verbal explanation.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel comfortable experimenting and whether they need additional encouragement.

Adaptation: Participants can work individually, in pairs or in small groups.

NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY:

Photographing details in nature, such as colours, textures, patterns or moments that capture participants' attention. This activity encourages mindfulness, careful observation and a personal connection with the environment.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants are focusing on exploration and discovery rather than feeling pressured to take "perfect" photographs.

Adaptation: Mobile phones can be used, and the activity may include simple photography tasks or themed challenges tailored to the group.

STORYTELLING:

Creating stories inspired by nature, the surrounding environment or the group's shared experiences. Stories may be based on real events, symbolic ideas or entirely fictional narratives.

The facilitator should observe: participants' comfort levels when sharing their stories and whether everyone has an opportunity to contribute in a way that suits them.

Adaptation: The activity can be carried out individually, in pairs or in groups, and may involve speaking, writing or improvisation.

NATURE-INSPIRED REFLECTIVE WRITING OR POETRY:

Writing short reflections, poems or notes about thoughts, emotions, impressions or associations that arise while spending time in nature. This activity can support emotional processing and increase awareness of personal experiences.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel under pressure to write "correctly" or to share their work with the group.

Adaptation: Participants may write freely, respond to guiding questions or choose not to share what they have written.

NATURE MANDALS:

Creating circular patterns using stones, twigs, leaves, flowers and other natural materials. This activity can have a calming effect by encouraging participants to focus on rhythm, detail and the creative process.

The facilitator should observe: the pace of the activity and whether participants feel pressured to achieve a "perfect" result.

Adaptation: The activity can be completed individually or collaboratively and can vary in length and complexity.

DRAWING OR MAPPING THE EXPERIENCE OF A PLACE:

Participants use drawings, symbols or simple maps to represent how they experience a particular place, route or outdoor activity. This can help them connect their emotions with the environment and reflect on their personal experience.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel uncomfortable about drawing or comparing their work with others.

Adaptation: The emphasis should remain on personal experience and expression rather than artistic or technical ability.

SYMBOLIC OBJECTS (GROUP AMULETS):

Participants each find a natural object – such as a stone, a fallen feather or an interesting twig – that symbolises their current state, a personal strength or a hope for the future. They may decorate it in a simple way or combine it with the objects collected by others to create a shared group mosaic or installation. This activity encourages participants to connect their inner experiences with the natural environment while strengthening group cohesion.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel pressured to find the "best" or "most beautiful" object and how comfortable they are sharing the meaning behind their choice.

Adaptation: Participants may choose to keep the meaning of their object private, share it with one trusted person, or discuss it with the whole group.

Guidelines for delivering activities:

When facilitating creative activities, it is important to create an atmosphere in which participants feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgement or making mistakes.
Young people may engage with these activities in different ways:

- **Connecting with the group:** For some participants, creative activities provide a valuable opportunity for social interaction and a sense of belonging.
- **Personal reflection:** For others, they offer a quieter space for self-reflection and more inward-focused participation.

Facilitator's note:
Rather than directing participants towards a specific outcome, facilitators should provide an open and supportive environment that encourages exploration, imagination and different forms of participation. It is often the spontaneous creative process itself that has the greatest impact and creates opportunities for authentic experiences.

A micro-example from practice:

During creative activities, participants who may have been quieter during group discussions often become more actively engaged through photography, drawing or working with natural materials. These forms of expression can provide a less exposed and emotionally safer way for young people to participate, communicate and connect with others.

2.1.3. Reflective Activities

Reflection is an essential part of experiential learning because it enables participants to move beyond simply having an experience and to connect it with their feelings, behaviours, relationships and everyday lives.

In natural settings, reflection often feels more spontaneous and less formal than it does indoors, making it easier for many young people to participate and express their personal experiences.

Reflection in Nature: Connecting Experiences with Everyday Life

What do reflective activities offer?

Reflective activities create opportunities to slow down, think deeply and connect experiences with personal meaning. They can help participants to:

- Recognise their own needs, emotions and responses more easily.
- Develop a stronger sense of connection with the group through listening, being present and developing mutual understanding.

Flexibility and Reducing Pressure

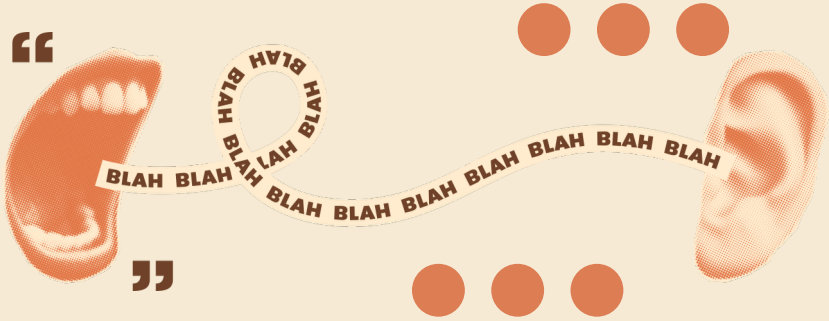
Reflection does not always need to be verbal, nor should it be presented as an expectation to disclose personal feelings or analyse one's emotions. Likewise, participants should never feel pressured to share personal experiences.

Instead, facilitators can offer a range of ways for participants to express themselves according to their preferences, including:

- **Non-verbal expression:** Drawing, photography, movement or simply spending time in quiet reflection.
- **Group reflection:** Sharing thoughts and feelings within the group, for those who feel comfortable doing so.
- **Individual reflection:** Quiet personal reflection for participants who prefer a more private approach.

Guidelines for Working with the Group

- Remember that reflection does not have to involve deep emotional conversations. Sometimes a single thoughtful question or just a few minutes of silence is enough.
- Create an environment where there is no pressure to share personal experiences, and where observation and symbolic forms of expression are equally welcome.
- These simple moments can effectively encourage self-awareness, presence and a deeper understanding of one's own experience.



The activities in this category may be individual or group-based, verbal or non-verbal, brief or more structured and in-depth. What they all have in common is a focus on reflection, connection, self-awareness and processing experiences.

Their intensity should always be adapted to the needs of the group, participants' comfort levels, the group's dynamics and the overall sense of safety within the group.

Examples of Reflective Activities:

JOURNALING:

Encouraging participants to keep a personal journal or write short reflections about their experiences in nature can help them slow down, become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, and process their experiences more effectively.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel any pressure to write or to share what they have written with others.

Adaptation: Participants may write freely, respond to guiding questions, or use drawings and symbols instead of words.

CHECK-IN AND CHECK-OUT CIRCLES:

Short group circles held at the beginning or end of an activity, where participants share how they are feeling, what they hope to gain from the experience, or what they are taking away from it. These activities can help foster a sense of connection, presence and belonging within the group.

The facilitator should observe: whether everyone feels safe enough to participate and whether there is any pressure to share personal experiences.

Adaptation: Participants may contribute verbally, use a single word, a symbol or a gesture, or simply choose to pass.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS:

Using simple questions about participants' experiences, emotions or relationships can help them connect the activity with their everyday lives.

The facilitator should observe: whether the questions are clear, appropriate for the group and conducive to a safe discussion.

Adaptation: Questions may be used individually, in pairs, in small groups or as written reflection prompts.

SOLO TIME IN NATURE:

Giving participants time to spend alone in nature without a specific task allows them to slow down, observe their thoughts and become more present.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel safe and comfortable during their time alone.

Adaptation: The duration should be adjusted to the group's experience and comfort levels, with clear boundaries regarding both the location and the time available.

THE TALKING STICK METHOD: Using a talking object — such as a stick, stone or another natural item — during group reflection encourages a slower pace, respectful turn-taking and more attentive listening.

The facilitator should observe: the group dynamics, participants' sense of safety, and whether speaking and silence are both respected.

Adaptation: Participants should always have the option to remain silent if they prefer not to speak.

GROUP REFLECTION CIRCLES:

Structured or informal group discussions held after an activity, during which participants share their impressions, emotions or experiences. These conversations can strengthen group cohesion and promote mutual understanding.

The facilitator should observe: the balance between speaking and listening, and whether participants are able to contribute in ways that feel comfortable to them.

Adaptation: Reflection sessions may be brief and informal or more structured, depending on the group's energy levels and needs.

USING NATURE METAPHORS:

Participants use elements of nature — such as the weather, a river, a tree, a path or a landscape — as metaphors to describe their experiences or emotions. This approach can make it easier to express feelings in a less direct and emotionally safer way.

The facilitator should observe: whether participants feel comfortable using symbolic language and whether the activity requires additional explanation.

Adaptation: Nature metaphors may be explored through discussion, drawing, photography or individual reflection.

Guidelines for Working with the Group:

When facilitating reflective activities, it is essential to create a safe and supportive atmosphere where participants feel free to express themselves without pressure or fear of judgement. Participants process their experiences in different ways:

- **Verbal sharing:** Some young people are most comfortable taking part in group discussions and exchanging thoughts with others.
- **Individual reflection:** Others prefer quiet personal reflection, silence or non-verbal forms of expression.

Facilitator's note: Do not expect or encourage participants to provide "deep" or highly personal responses, and avoid imposing interpretations or conclusions. The aim is not to analyse participants but to create opportunities for connection, reflection and personal meaning. Often, the briefest moments of reflection have the greatest impact.

A micro-example from practice:

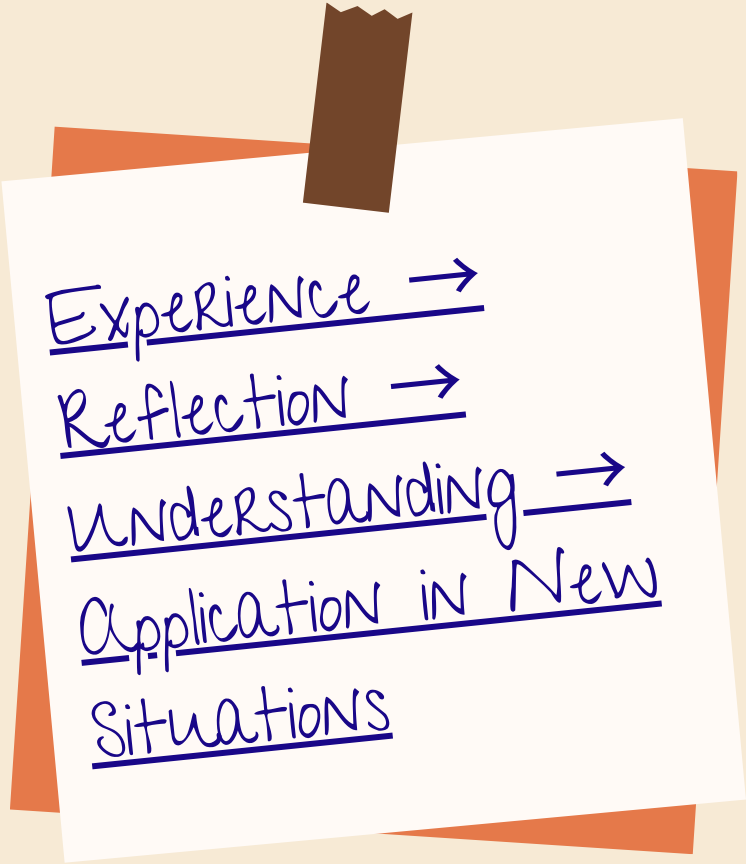
After an outdoor activity, some participants may not wish to take part in the group reflection straight away. However, they may later choose to share their thoughts and experiences through personal journalling, photography or an informal conversation. Allowing participants the time and space to reflect in their own way often leads to more genuine and meaningful engagement.

2.2. Nature for Learning (NFL) Methods in Practice

Non-formal learning is effective because young people do not feel as though they are in a traditional classroom. By stepping outside their usual routines and into a natural environment, learning becomes more engaging and meaningful. It takes place through:

- **Experience and challenges:** Young people learn through active participation and direct experience.
- **Group dynamics:** They observe how the group functions, makes decisions, seeks support and resolves disagreements.
- **Personal development:** They become more aware of their own reactions, needs and personal boundaries.

NFL methods often feel natural and unobtrusive because they bring together experience, emotions, relationships and learning into a single process. Young people learn not only from the activities themselves, but also from the way the group functions — how they respond to challenges, make decisions, support one another, resolve conflicts, and recognise their own needs and boundaries.



It is important to remember that the goal is not to deliver a method perfectly. What matters most is creating an experience in which participants feel able to explore, experiment and engage in ways that suit them best.

Practical Example: Experiential Learning Through a Challenge

Activity: *A group of young people is given the task of building a simple shelter together using natural materials available in the surrounding environment.*

1. Concrete Experience – Do It!

Participants work together to plan, cooperate, allocate tasks, find practical solutions and respond to time constraints and real-life challenges during the activity.

2. Reflective Observation – Think About It!

After the activity, the group reflects on how they communicated, made decisions, what they found frustrating, and what worked well.

- What did we find easy?
- What was most challenging?
- How did we make decisions?
- How did we respond when things did not go according to plan?

3. Abstract Conceptualisation – Make Sense of It!

Participants connect their experience with broader themes such as:

- Communication.
- Leadership.
- Teamwork and collaboration.
- Managing stress.
- Sharing responsibility and allocating roles.
- Problem-solving.
- Building a sense of safety and trust within the team.

4. Active Experimentation – Try It Out!

The group applies what they have learned to a new challenge or activity, using a different approach to collaboration and organisation. For example, they might organise their communication differently or distribute roles and responsibilities more evenly within the team.

In this way, the experience becomes more than simply "an activity they completed". It becomes an opportunity to better understand their own reactions, relationships and ways of working together as a group.

The following section presents a range of Nature for Learning (NFL) approaches and methods that can help create experiences which simultaneously promote learning, connection, emotional safety and the mental well-being of young people.

These are not intended as rigid models that must be followed precisely, but as flexible approaches and practical tools that can be adapted to the needs of the group, the context and the objectives of the programme.
The methods described serve different purposes and create different types of learning experiences:

- **Collaboration and problem-solving** – activities that encourage teamwork and the collective search for solutions.
- **Reflection and dialogue** – methods that create opportunities for deeper thinking, meaningful conversations and the exchange of perspectives.
- **Practical experience** – hands-on learning that helps young people develop resilience, independence and a stronger sense of competence.

2.2.1. Nature-based Learning in Youth Work

By stepping away from their usual routines and everyday distractions, young people often respond more spontaneously when they spend time in nature. They are also more likely to develop authentic relationships with others, with themselves and with the natural environment.

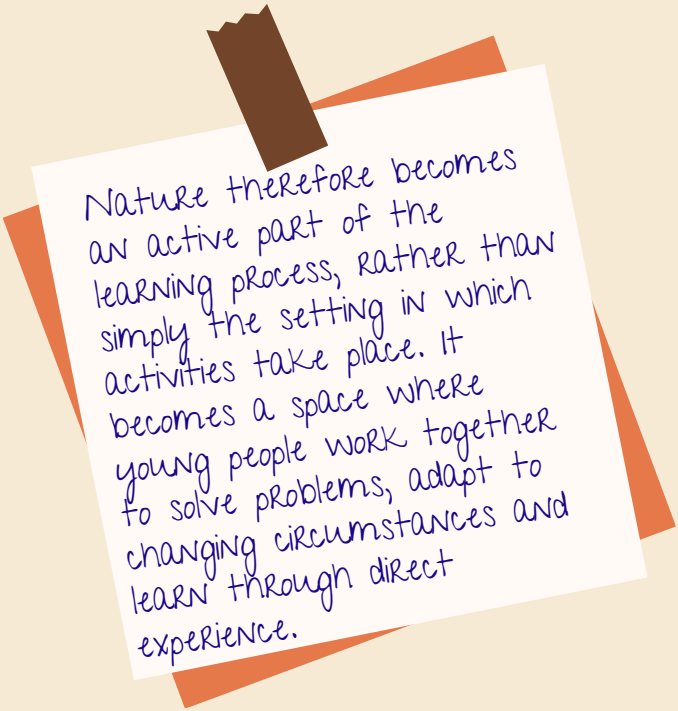
Walking together, navigating unfamiliar surroundings, making decisions as a group, responding to unexpected situations, or simply spending time outdoors can all create opportunities to develop communication, collaboration, self-awareness, emotional regulation and a stronger sense of connection.

Nature-based learning is about much more than simply taking activities outdoors. The key difference lies in whether the natural environment is used as an active part of both the learning experience and the learning process.
At this point, it is worth pausing to ask:

What makes nature an integral part of the learning process? What does this look like in practice when working with young people?

It means making purposeful use of the opportunities that the natural environment naturally provides — changing weather conditions, varied terrain, limited resources, the need to adapt, navigating unfamiliar spaces together, using natural materials, the rhythm of movement, and the everyday situations that arise spontaneously while spending time outdoors.

Participants learn not only through discussion or theory, but through the experiences they share. These situations create valuable opportunities to develop communication, adaptability, emotional regulation and resilience. They also influence how participants think, collaborate, respond to challenges, and connect with themselves, with one another and with the natural world.



How Does This Relate to Psychosocial Development and Mental Well-being?

Nature-based learning is particularly powerful because it engages the whole person—it brings together the body, emotions, relationships, the surrounding environment and the real-life situations in which young people find themselves. Through authentic experiences, young people learn how to respond to uncertainty, frustration, unexpected changes, fatigue and the need to seek or offer support. At the same time, the natural environment encourages them to slow down, become more present and experience a sense of mental restoration.

FACILITATOR'S REFLECTION TOOL

During the activity, you can encourage...

- Shared decision-making
- Organising tasks and allocating responsibilities
- Adapting to changing weather conditions and unexpected situations
- Navigating the environment and solving problems together
- Collaborating during challenges and practical tasks

At the same time, pay attention to...

- ·Participants' emotional responses
- Signs of stress, frustration or withdrawal from the activity
- How the group provides support to one another
- Participants' sense of safety and inclusion
- Group dynamics and communication between participants

When delivering activities in nature, the experience they create is far more important than whether everything goes "perfectly". Challenges do not have to be extreme to be meaningful. In fact, it is often the small, everyday situations – such as coping with unexpected rain, organising a meal together or resolving a misunderstanding – that provide the richest opportunities for learning and connection.

It is during these unplanned moments that people's usual defences begin to fade and the group's genuine dynamics emerge. Some participants naturally take the initiative, others become more reserved, while some may respond with frustration. These situations are not flaws in the programme; they are valuable learning opportunities that help develop flexibility, problem-solving skills and stronger collaboration within the group.

A micro-example from practice:

During an outdoor group challenge, participants are asked to work together to build a simple shelter before the rain arrives. At first, disagreements arise over how tasks should be allocated and how the group should communicate, and some participants become frustrated as the activity does not go according to plan. However, through trial and error, discussion and adaptation, the group gradually finds an effective way of working together. During the reflection that follows, participants often realise that what they remember most is not simply the successful construction of the shelter, but the sense of teamwork, mutual support and the shared experience of overcoming the challenge together.

2.2.2. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Nature

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is based on learning through real-life challenges and the collaborative search for solutions. Participants work together to analyse a situation, explore possible approaches and develop effective responses through cooperation, critical thinking and hands-on experience.

Facilitator's Reflection Tool

Challenges or Problems You Can Incorporate into Your Activities...

- Working together to organise a shelter or shared outdoor space
- Allocating limited resources within the group
- Planning and preparing meals outdoors
- Navigating the environment and finding a route
- Overcoming an obstacle or solving a practical challenge as a team
- Making shared decisions when different opinions arise
- Organising tasks and allocating responsibilities within the group during outdoor activities

At the Same Time, Consider...

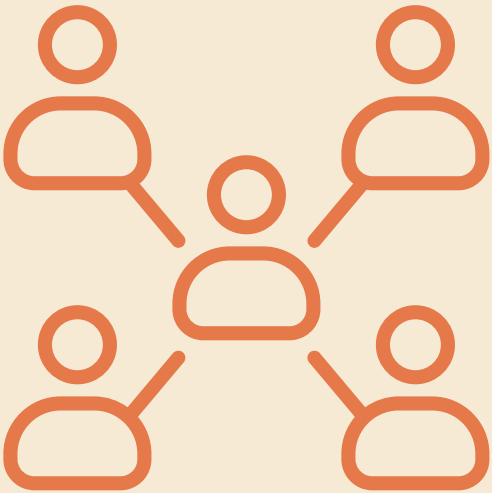
- Who naturally takes the initiative
- Whether anyone withdraws from the process
- Whether everyone has an opportunity to contribute and be heard
- How participants respond to frustration or stress
- Whether the group develops a collaborative approach or whether certain individuals dominate
- How participants make decisions and share responsibility

The Role of the Facilitator:

The facilitator's role is not to provide step-by-step instructions, immediate answers or ready-made solutions. Instead, they support the learning process by observing, asking thoughtful questions, and creating a safe environment in which participants can explore, experiment and work together.

In a natural environment, this approach is particularly effective because activities involve real-life situations, limited resources, the need to adapt, and interdependence within the group.
It is through these experiences that young people often become more aware of their own reactions, the way they function within a group, and how they approach problems and challenges.

A problem or challenge in a natural setting does not have to be large or complex to provide meaningful learning opportunities. Even simple situations can create valuable opportunities for developing group dynamics and supporting experiential learning.



It is equally important to adapt activities to the needs of the group by considering:

- The level of challenge and complexity.
- The time available for the activity.
- The physical demands of the activity and the conditions of the environment.
- The group's experience, energy levels and dynamics.
- The amount of structure and support provided by the facilitator.

Some groups will benefit from clearer guidance and additional support, while others will thrive when given more freedom to explore, make decisions and find their own solutions.

The focus of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach is not simply on completing the task successfully, but on what happens throughout the process. In particular, facilitators should pay attention to:

- How the group communicates.
- Whether participants listen to one another.
- How decisions are made.
- How participants respond to stress, frustration or uncertainty.
- Whether there is space for different opinions and ideas.
- Whether participants offer support to one another.

It should not be expected that the group will complete every task "perfectly" or without conflict. Moments of uncertainty, disagreement or misunderstanding are a natural part of the learning process, as they create valuable opportunities for discussion, reflection and the development of new ways of working together.

A micro-example from practice:

During an outdoor activity, the group is given the task of preparing a shared meal using limited resources while organising roles and responsibilities within the team. At first, some participants try to take control of the process, while others withdraw and wait for instructions. As the activity progresses, the group gradually begins to distribute tasks more effectively, listen to different ideas and adapt to the situation. During the reflection that follows, participants often realise that their greatest learning did not come from completing the task itself, but from the experience of communication, teamwork, managing frustration and understanding how they function under pressure.

2.2.3. Discussions and Reflective Dialogue

Conversations in nature often feel more relaxed and spontaneous. The quiet surroundings, slower pace and absence of everyday distractions create an atmosphere in which it is easier to listen, reflect and share. Many young people find it easier to open up while walking, sitting on the grass, or talking in pairs or small groups.

As a facilitator, keep the following in mind

- **There are no right or wrong answers.** The purpose of reflection is not to reach a single conclusion, but to exchange perspectives and explore personal experiences.
- **Avoid creating pressure.** Questions should never feel like a test. It is enough to create an open space where different viewpoints and experiences are welcomed and respected.
- **Respect participants' choice.** Listening and observing are also valid forms of participation. Participants should always be free to respond briefly, symbolically, non-verbally, or simply choose to keep their experience to themselves.

Informal and spontaneous conversations in nature often create the greatest opportunities for connection, mutual understanding and a stronger sense of belonging within the group.

Facilitator's Reflection Tool

They Can Take Many Different Forms...

- Through group discussions after an activity
- During a walk in pairs or small groups
- Through brief sharing moments throughout the day
- In a circle format, where everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen
- By using reflective questions while spending time in nature
- Through informal conversations around the campfire, during breaks or while sharing a meal

At the Same Time, You Can Observe...

- Whether participants are able to engage in ways that suit them
- Whether there is space for different voices and perspectives
- Whether any individuals dominate the discussion
- Whether the group feels safe when sharing experiences
- Whether participants are developing the ability to listen to one another and respect different perspectives and experiences

When facilitating discussions and reflective dialogue, it is important to pay attention to the atmosphere, the pace of the conversation, and the group's overall sense of safety. Open-ended questions can help participants connect their experiences in nature with their emotions, relationships and mental well-being.

Examples of Reflective Questions:

- How did you feel while spending time in nature today?
- At what point did you feel most relaxed or most present?
- Was there anything during today's activities that you found challenging or frustrating?
- How did the group respond during moments of uncertainty or stress?
- What helped you feel connected to others today?
- Did you notice any changes in your mood while spending time outdoors?
- Which moment from today stands out most in your memory, and why?
- Is there something in nature that reflects how you feel or what you experienced today?

Activities can be adapted by:

- Holding conversations in pairs or small groups instead of a large circle.
- Adjusting the length of reflection according to the group's energy levels and needs.
- Using movement, natural objects, photography or drawing as prompts for discussion.
- Allowing participants to take part without feeling obliged to share personal experiences.

A micro-example from practice:

After a group hike, the facilitator invites participants to discuss, in pairs while taking a gentle walk, a moment during the day when they felt either most connected or most challenged. Some participants who had previously been reluctant to contribute during whole-group discussions often feel more comfortable and willing to engage in this format. Later, during the group reflection, participants frequently comment that these relaxed conversations in nature helped them feel safer, more connected and more at ease within the group.

2.2.4. Practical Workshops and Experiential Learning

Practical workshops and experiential learning in nature are based on a simple principle: young people learn best when they can try things for themselves and learn through direct experience. Rather than relying on theory alone, learning takes place through action, collaboration, experimentation, trial and error, adaptation and hands-on practice.

Practical activities such as outdoor cooking, learning to navigate in nature and working with natural materials provide excellent opportunities for:

- **Personal development:** Building independence, patience and adaptability.
- **Social skills:** Encouraging teamwork, mutual support, spontaneous communication, humour and stronger interpersonal connections.
- **Adaptation:** Developing confidence in unfamiliar environments and fostering a greater connection with natural processes.

For some young people, practical activities provide a more accessible way of becoming involved in the group, as they encourage participation through action, collaboration and shared tasks, without placing significant pressure on verbal communication. These experiences can also support mental well-being by giving participants a sense of purpose, belonging and active involvement in a shared process.

Being in nature further strengthens experiential learning by engaging the body, the senses, movement and real-life situations that require presence and active participation.

Planning and creating something together using available natural materials or equipment, adapting to changing weather conditions, navigating different types of terrain, and responding to unexpected situations all become part of the learning experience.

It is important to remember that the facilitator's role is not to provide all the answers. Instead, they create a safe environment in which participants feel able to experiment, collaborate and learn together. Often, it is the unsuccessful attempts, moments of improvisation and unexpected situations that become the most valuable part of the learning process.

We learn best when things go off-script. Let the youth wing it!

Facilitator's Reflection Tool

During the Activity, You Can Include...

- Outdoor cooking
- Shelter building
- Navigation and wayfinding in nature
- Gardening and working with plants
- Making objects from natural materials
- Basic outdoor skills and survival techniques

At the Same Time, You Can Observe...

- The way the group communicates, allocates tasks and the level of participants' involvement
- How the group organises the process and makes decisions
- Whether participants feel free to experiment
- Whether there is space for different ideas and opinions
- How participants respond to disagreements or unexpected situations

Activities may be short or form part of a longer-term process throughout the programme. They may be very simple or more demanding, depending on the group's experience, the equipment available and the weather conditions.

When delivering practical workshops, the focus should remain on the process and the experience rather than on the quality of the final product.

Participants should not feel that they are being assessed or that they have to complete a task perfectly for the activity to be valuable.

What matters most is the process itself—how the group collaborates, how participants respond, how they make decisions, and how they feel throughout the activity.

A micro-example from practice:

During an outdoor cooking activity, the group may encounter challenges such as a shortage of certain ingredients, a change in the weather or poor task organisation.

Although the situation may initially cause frustration, it is often the shared search for solutions that leads to greater collaboration, spontaneous connection and a sense of shared achievement.

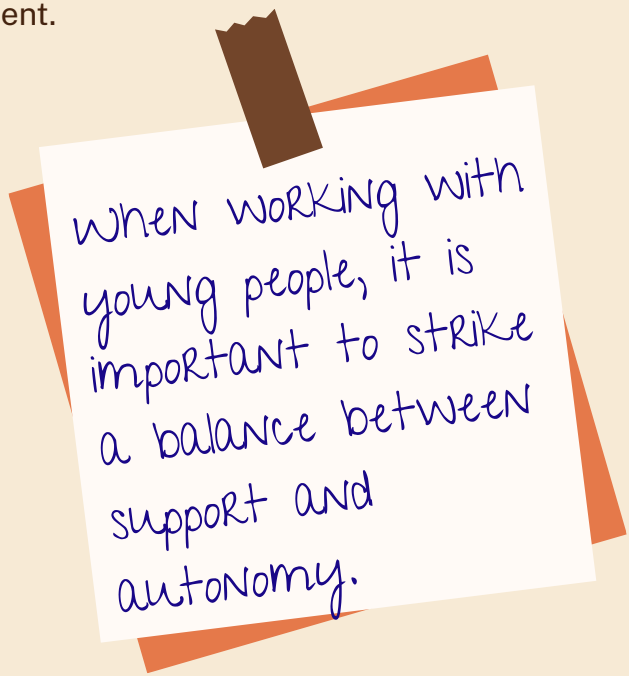
2.2.5. Understanding the Emotional Needs of Young People

Time spent in nature, living as a group and the intensive experiences that are part of a youth exchange programme can give rise to a wide range of emotions and reactions, all of which are entirely normal. Young people do not arrive at a programme with the same life experiences, sense of security, social skills or emotional capacity.The experience of taking part in a programme may lead to different responses, including:

- **Positive reactions:** A sense of relaxation, increased energy and a quicker sense of connection with the group.
- **More challenging reactions:** Fatigue, uncertainty, feeling overwhelmed by new group dynamics, or a need to withdraw.

Nature is a powerful resource for supporting mental well-being, but for young people who are outside their usual routines, it may also evoke feelings of vulnerability.

For this reason, it is essential to continuously observe the emotional dynamics of the group, rather than focusing solely on the technical delivery of activities.
Everyone responds differently to the same experience — some young people need action to relax, while others need peace and quiet. Understanding young people does not mean analysing them; it means noticing the small changes in their behaviour that may indicate someone needs a break, some support, or simply a greater sense of safety at that particular moment.



The facilitator's role is not to "rescue" participants from every moment of discomfort, but to create the conditions in which they feel able to set their own boundaries or take a break when needed. Avoid jumping to conclusions — a reaction that seems unusual does not necessarily indicate a problem. Often, a participant simply needs some rest, a slower pace or time to adjust.

Remember that a sense of belonging within a group is not built through big moments, but through small ones: sharing a meal, offering support, and knowing that the group accepts you as you are, without the pressure to constantly prove yourself.

Facilitator's Reflection Tool

Approaches You Should Include...

- Creating a predictable rhythm of activities
- Communicating expectations and boundaries clearly
- Providing opportunities for choice and adapting participation
- Allowing space for silence, rest and time alone
- Short check-in moments throughout the day
- Activities in small groups or pairs
- Informal conversations during walks or while carrying out shared tasks
- Encouraging mutual support and collaboration among participants

Some of the Signs to Pay Attention to...

- Withdrawing from group activities
- Sudden changes in mood
- Irritability or increased conflict
- Fatigue and low energy levels
- Feeling overwhelmed by sensory stimuli or group dynamics
- Difficulties engaging with the group
- A need for silence or time alone
- An excessive need for control or constant reassurance
- Avoiding certain activities or situations

Understanding Matters More Than the Programme

A facilitator does not need to have all the answers, but they should be able to recognise when someone needs support, rest, a sense of safety or space to withdraw.

During more intensive outdoor programmes, participants' emotional responses may vary from one day to the next due to fatigue, weather conditions, a lack of privacy or group dynamics. For this reason, it is important that facilitators do not view participants solely through the lens of their level of activity or motivation, but also consider their emotional needs at any given moment.

Sometimes, flexibility, understanding and a small adjustment to an activity will have a greater impact than following a programme exactly as planned.

A micro-example from practice:

During a multi-day outdoor programme, a participant may become quieter and less engaged in group activities. Rather than immediately encouraging them to participate more in front of the group, the facilitator may choose to have a brief one-to-one conversation during a walk or offer the participant the opportunity to take a short break. This can help them regain a sense of safety and gradually re-engage with the activities in a way that feels comfortable for them.

2.2.6. Nature as a Resource for Mental Well-being, Resilience and Mental Strength

Spending time in nature and stepping away from everyday routines helps young people develop adaptability and self-confidence through small, real-life challenges — such as pitching a tent in the rain or finding their way during a walk. Nature does not eliminate stress, but by removing many of the distractions of daily life, it provides a calm environment for relaxation and connection.

These challenges do not have to be difficult, nor do young people need to be constantly pushed beyond their "comfort zone". Much greater value lies in small tasks where they have support, the freedom to make choices, and the confidence to ask for help when they need it.

Resilience does not mean "being strong all the time", ignoring emotions or enduring difficulties at any cost.

What Does Resilience Mean in Youth Work?

- Recognising one's own boundaries.
- Asking for support when it is needed.
- Accepting mistakes and adapting without feeling ashamed.
- Being able to move forward after facing challenges.

How Does Resilience Develop?

- Through direct, real-life experience.
- Through spending time in nature and taking part in outdoor activities.
- With the support and guidance of the facilitator.

Resilience develops through small steps and by gradually overcoming situations that once felt uncomfortable. In this process, nature provides a space for emotional regulation by distancing us from everyday distractions, calming us through movement, and encouraging us to be fully present in the moment. Ultimately, it is the ordinary moments — such as taking a break together and supporting one another — that make the greatest contribution to a sense of connection and to mental well-being.

Facilitator's Reflection Tool

Spending Time in Nature Often Involves...

- ·Experiences outside everyday routines
- Facing small challenges and unexpected situations
- Adapting to changing conditions
- Working together to solve problems
- Physical activity and movement
- A sense of presence and focusing on the present moment
- Experiences of collaboration and group support
- A sense of achievement after overcoming a challenge

Approaches That Can Support the Development of Resilience and Mental Strength Include...

- Activities that require collaborative problem-solving
- Gradual participation in new or unfamiliar situations
- Physical activities adapted to the group's abilities
- Tasks that require collaboration and mutual support
- Reflection after challenging situations
- Activities that involve navigation, organisation and decision-making
- Moments of silence, slowing down and becoming aware of one's own reactions
- Creating opportunities for support and sharing experiences within the group

The facilitator should not create artificial pressure or romanticise discomfort and "stepping outside one's comfort zone". The aim is not to prove resilience or endurance, but to create experiences through which young people can develop confidence in their own abilities and in their relationships with others.

A micro-example from practice:

During a longer walk in nature, some members of the group may begin to feel tired, frustrated or less motivated due to challenging terrain or changing weather conditions. Rather than focusing solely on reaching the objective of the activity, the facilitator can encourage participants to support one another, adjust the pace and take short breaks when needed. Experiences like these often help young people develop a stronger sense of togetherness, adaptability and confidence in their ability to cope with challenges.

2.3. Embracing Diversity – Inclusion

In youth work, inclusion is not simply about enabling different participants to take part. It is about creating a space in which different needs and ways of participating are recognised, accepted and feel safe. In a natural environment, this becomes even more important, as spending extended periods of time together and dealing with unpredictable situations can make individual differences more apparent.

Participants respond differently to noise, silence, physical contact and sharing emotions, but the flexibility of the natural environment provides opportunities to move beyond more traditional ways of working.

What does this mean in practice?

While some participants naturally take on an active role from the outset, others need more time to adjust. Likewise, some feel more comfortable with clear guidance and structure, while others prefer spontaneity. The key is to avoid creating pressure for everyone to participate with the same level of intensity or to respond in the same way.

When delivering activities, it is important to pay attention to:

- Different communication and participation styles.
- Introverted and extroverted participants.
- The need for occasional time alone or moments of silence.
- Sensory overload and fatigue.
- Cultural differences in the way emotions and opinions are expressed.
- Different levels of self-confidence and experience of spending time in nature.
- Providing participants with choice in how they take part.

Good inclusive practice rarely requires major adjustments. More often, it is shaped by small facilitation decisions—how questions are asked, how space is created for silence, how the pace of an activity is adapted, and how different ways of participating are recognised and accepted.

An inclusive activity is not one in which everyone does the same thing, but one in which everyone has the opportunity to participate in a way that feels safe and meaningful to them.

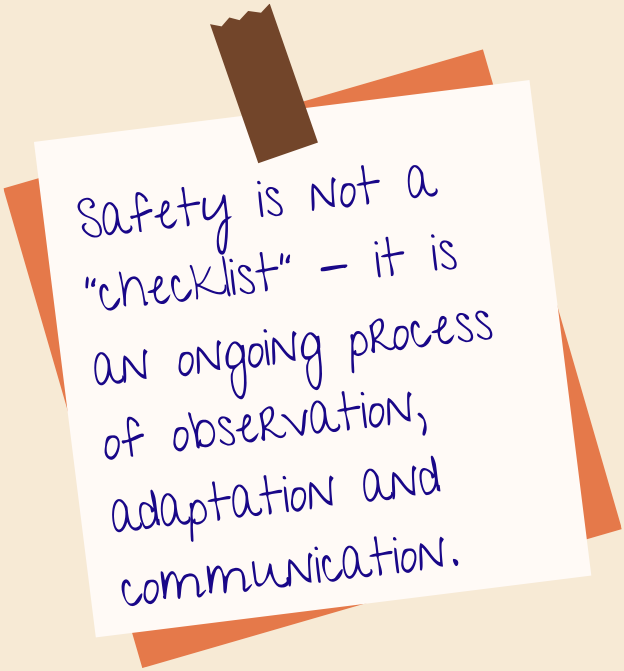
- **Participants who do not feel comfortable in large group discussions** → Shared movement, practical tasks or activities in smaller groups.
- **Participants who need more time to become involved** → The opportunity to observe an activity before taking an active part.
- **Participants who experience sensory overload** → Quieter spaces, shorter activities, regular breaks or the opportunity to step away from the group when needed.
- **Participants who find non-verbal expression easier** → Drawing, photography, symbols, movement or working with natural materials.
- **Participants from different cultural backgrounds** → Avoid making assumptions about how someone "should" express emotions, participate or communicate within the group.
- **Participants who find competitive activities challenging** → Place greater emphasis on collaboration, shared goals and flexible ways of participating.

Involving participants in organising part of the programme through shared planning, allocating tasks and making decisions about outdoor activities increases their sense of inclusion, belonging and responsibility within the group. When young people are given opportunities to suggest ideas, take part in organising activities or adapt them to the needs of the group, they are more likely to feel seen, valued and actively involved in the process.

2.4. Safety

Safety in outdoor youth work is not simply a matter of rules, equipment or carrying out a risk assessment before an activity. It is built continuously through observing the group, adapting to the situation, maintaining clear communication, and the facilitator's active presence throughout the entire process.

Spending time in nature often involves unexpected situations that require flexibility, timely responses and adaptation to changing circumstances, such as changing weather conditions, fatigue, different group paces, participants' emotional responses and/or limited time. All of these factors influence the dynamics of an activity, communication and the group's sense of safety.



Good facilitation in nature involves continuously monitoring the group's energy levels, the weather conditions and the individual needs of participants. Sometimes, deciding to shorten, slow down or adapt an activity will contribute more to the group's safety and well-being than following the original plan exactly as intended.

Before Delivering an Outdoor Activity, It Is Important To:

- Check that essential safety equipment is available, including a first aid kit, fire safety equipment, an adequate supply of drinking water, appropriate clothing and reliable means of communication.
- Provide a clear and accessible introduction to the safety guidelines, adapted to the group and the planned activities.
- Familiarise participants with the environment, potential risks, weather conditions, movement guidelines and appropriate responses to unexpected situations.
- Provide clear instructions in advance on safe handling procedures and organise activities in ways that minimise the risk of injury, particularly when using tools, working with fire or carrying out more physically demanding tasks.

Safety should not be presented through fear or strict rules, but as a shared responsibility between the facilitator and the group that enables participants to feel more relaxed, secure and confident in taking part.

Safety During Activities Includes:

- Clearly defined boundaries and expectations.
- Adapting activities to the group's experience and abilities.
- Monitoring participants' physical and emotional well-being.
- Remaining flexible and adapting the plan whenever necessary.
- Creating opportunities for questions, breaks and support.
- Maintaining clear communication during challenging or unexpected situations.

Emotional safety is equally important. Participants are more willing to collaborate and step outside their usual routines when they know they can say if something makes them uncomfortable, ask for support, or adapt their level of participation.

Safety does not mean avoiding challenges, as challenges are an important part of learning and personal growth. What matters is that participants face those challenges with appropriate support and the freedom to make their own choices.

The facilitator does not need to have all the answers or control every moment. It is enough to establish a safe framework, adapt the pace to the needs of the group, and create space for reflection and collaborative problem-solving.

FOLLOW-UP MEASURES

The end of an activity or exchange does not mean the end of the learning process. Experiences, relationships, behavioural changes, new insights and personal realisations often continue to develop even after returning home. This is precisely why monitoring and evaluation form a crucial part of any programme focused on learning, mental well-being and the personal development of young people.

Monitoring and evaluation are not just about collecting data or fulfilling project obligations. They help us understand how participants experienced the programme, what they found useful, what changes they noticed in themselves, and how the experience can be improved in the future.

It is equally important to think about what happens after the activity ends. The way contact is maintained with participants, providing space for continued learning, and sharing the programme's results can significantly influence the long-term value and sustainability of the achieved outcomes.

This chapter presents simple monitoring and evaluation methods, suggestions for maintaining support after the exchange, and ways to share results and ensure the long-term impact of the programme.

3.1. Monitoring and evaluation methods

Monitoring and evaluation in youth exchange and outdoor learning programmes **do not relate only to measuring results, but also to understanding:**

- participant experiences
- the processes they undergo
- the processes they undergo

The focus is on how participants experienced the activities, what they found useful, challenging or new, and how their experience can be linked to personal development and group dynamics.

Evaluation does not have to be formal, nor does it take place exclusively at the end of the programme.

LA logical flow you can follow:
process monitoring + Youthpass reflection
→ **final evaluation**
→ **pre/post comparison**
→ **impact measurement**
→ **Youthpass reflection**

3.1.1. Continuous monitoring of reflexes during the programme

Evaluation is most effective when it becomes a natural part of the learning process, rather than a separate task carried out at the end of the programme.

Such an approach enables:

- a better understanding of the needs of individuals and the group
- participants to more easily recognise what they have learnt, which skills they have developed, and how specific experiences have influenced their personal development
- timely adjustments to activities, the pace of work, and the level of support
- timely adjustments to activities, the pace of work, and the level of support

What does this mean in practice?

Do not wait for the final day of the programme to find out how participants are feeling or what they need. A quick question after an activity, a reflection circle at the end of the day, or simply observing group dynamics provides information that is just as valuable as a final evaluation questionnaire.

In a natural environment, participants usually find it easier to share honest impressions and reflections, and evaluation feels more natural and less formal because it can be integrated into the activities themselves, without setting aside a "special evaluation moment".

Method	When to use?	What does that look like in practice?	What does it enable the organisers to do?
Questionnaires and surveys	at the beginning and end of the programme, and as necessary during its implementation	Short, clear, unobtrusive questions, adapted to the participants' age and experience.	Insight into expectations, satisfaction, experience of the activity and assessment of the learning outcomes achieved.
Reflective activities (individual or group)	integrated throughout the entire programme	Participants share their experiences through conversation, writing, drawing or symbolic expression.	A deeper understanding of personal experience, the learning process and the changes participants notice in themselves.
Short introductory and concluding rounds	at the beginning or end of the day, activity or programme	Participants share a word, thought, feeling or a short reflection	Monitoring the group's energy and mood, sense of belonging, and changes throughout the programme.
Plus/Delta method	at the end of an activity, a day or a particular part of the programme	Participants write on paper, a poster or a board what they liked (+) and what they would like to change or improve (Δ).	Rapid identification of successful programme elements and areas for improvement.
Participant feedback	Continuous collection during implementation	informal conversations, group discussions, individual comments or suggestions	Timely recognition of the group's needs and the ability to adapt activities.
Anonymous Suggestions and Feedback Box	Throughout the entire programme	Participants anonymously drop comments, suggestions, questions or feedback into a box placed in a convenient location.	Gathering honest feedback, especially from participants who tend to be more reserved in a group.
Observation of the process by the facilitator	Throughout the entire programme	Observation of communication, cooperation, level of engagement, emotional reactions and group dynamics	Insight into processes that often remain unspoken but significantly influence participants' experience.

3.1.2. Final evaluation and impact assessment

Although evaluation is not just a final questionnaire that participants fill in on the last day of the programme, it still provides special value by collecting information on:

- participant satisfaction with the programme
- the perception of activities and working methods
- the feeling of inclusion and safety
- personal development and acquired competences
- the experience of spending time in nature
- changes in mental health and resilience
- suggestions for improving future activities

What does this enable?

Participants → gaining an overview of the entire experience and becoming aware of their own learning, changes, and personal development

Facilitators → a clearer insight into the achieved results and the impact of the programme, a better understanding of the needs of young people, and the adaptation of activities and working methods after the programme

Organisers → assessing the quality of the programme, planning future activities, and understanding the impact of the project

FACILITATOR REFLECTION TOOL

A brief note: The example questions shown below serve as inspiration and a starting point for creating evaluation tools. It is recommended that questions are always adapted to the project objectives, the profile of the participants, the programme themes, and the working methods used during the exchange.

A. BEFORE THE EXCHANGE (INITIAL STATE, EXPECTATIONS, PREPAREDNESS)	
1. Basic expectations	• What do you expect from this exchange? • What would be a good outcome of this experience for you? • Is there anything you are particularly looking forward to?
2. A sense of being prepared	• How prepared do you feel to participate? (Likert scale 1–5) • What gives you a sense of security about going on the exchange? • Is there anything that worries you or makes you feel insecure?
3. Group participation	• How do you feel about working in a new group of people? • What usually helps you to integrate into a new group more easily? • What makes it difficult for you to integrate?
4. Nature and activities	• What kind of experience do you have with spending time in nature and outdoor activities? • What suits you best: calmer or more dynamic activities? Why?
5. Personal goal	• What do you want to learn, develop or try out during the exchange?
6. Challenges and support	• Is there anything that facilitators should know about your needs or your way of participating? • How supported do you feel ahead of the departure? (Likert scale 1–5)

B. DURING THE EXCHANGE (daily or mid-term)

- Which part of today's activity was the most interesting and why?
- What new skill, knowledge or experience did you gain today?
- What challenges or obstacles did you face today?
- Did you feel supported today? (Yes/No + comment)
- How could we help you feel more comfortable or involved?
- Is there anything that would make it easier for you to participate at the moment?
- Do you need more support, more challenges or more time for yourself?
- How would you rate the organization of the day – food, accommodation, schedule, conditions? (Likert scale 1–5

C. AFTER THE EXCHANGE (EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION)	
1. General impression	• How would you describe your experience in a few sentences? • Did the exchange meet your expectations? Why?
2. Personal development	• What have you learnt about yourself during this experience? • Have you noticed any change in your behaviour, thinking, feelings or relationships with others?
3. Group experience	• How would you describe the atmosphere in the group? • Did you feel included? Why? • Did you feel included? Why? • Did you make new friends? (Yes/No/Somewhat)
4. Activities and nature	• Which themes and activities were the most useful or meaningful to you? Why? • How did spending time in nature affect your experience?
5. Challenges and support	• What was the most challenging for you and how did you handle it? • Did you have enough support from the facilitators and the group? • How would you rate the work of the leaders and facilitators? (Likert scale 1–5)
6. Concluding reflection	• What is the one thing you are taking away from this experience? • What message would you leave for future participants? • What are three things you would change about this exchange? • What are three things you would change about this exchange?

Here are two examples of simple questionnaire templates tailored for young people, using a Likert scale combined with emoji indicators to ensure they are visually appealing, quick to complete, and better suited for non-formal learning.

Pre-exchange Questionnaire | Likert scale: 1 = not at all / 5 = completely	
Expectations: How much are you looking forward to this exchange?	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Readiness: I feel ready to participate in the programme.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Safety in the group: I feel comfortable working with new people.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Concerns/uncertainty: I have worries regarding the exchange.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Being in nature: I feel comfortable during outdoor activities.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
***Participation in the group**: I find it easy to get involved in group activities.*	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Personal goal: I have a clear idea of what I want to learn or develop.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Support: I feel supported (by the group/leaders) before departure.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5

Post-Exchange Questionnaire | Likert scale: 1 = not at all / 5 = completely	
General impression: My experience during the exchange was:	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Expectations: The exchange met my expectations.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Personal development: I learned something new about myself.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Group: I felt included in the group.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Activities: I found the activities useful and interesting.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Nature: Being in nature had a positive impact on my experience.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Challenges: I successfully coped with challenges during the exchange.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Support: I felt sufficiently supported during the programme.	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Experience: What was the most important or meaningful experience for you?	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5
Message: What message would you leave for future participants?	😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5

From satisfaction to programme impact

Many evaluation questionnaires focus primarily on participant satisfaction. Whilst such information is useful, it does not necessarily show what the participants have learned or what real impact the programme has had on their development.

When comparing responses from before and after the exchange, evaluation becomes a tool for monitoring impact, rather than just satisfaction. In this way, it is possible to track changes related to mental well-being, a sense of belonging, self-confidence, cooperation, communication, self-regulation, and other non-formal learning goals.

Choose only a few of the best questions that fit your objectives and participants, as quality responses are more important than long forms.

BEFORE THE EXCHANGE		
Question/statement | scale : 😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5		Indicator
Emotional stability / initial state	I feel emotionally stable and ready for change.	Emotional preparedness / self-regulation
Sense of safety in the group	I feel safe in situations where I am meeting new people.	Social safety / group inclusion
Connectedness with others (NFL – relationship and cooperation)	I easily establish contact and cooperate with others.	Cooperation / communication
Self-confidence in unfamiliar situations	I feel safe in new and unpredictable situations.	Resilience / adaptability
Being in nature (NFL – environment as a tool)	I feel comfortable in natural environments and during outdoor activities.	Sensory comfort / presence in nature
Involvement in the group process	I feel that I can actively participate in the group in my own way.	Inclusion / participation
Self-expression	I easily express my thoughts and needs (verbally or non-verbally).	Communication / emotional expression
Motivation for learning through experience (Kolb / NFL)	I am motivated to learn through experience, activities, and practical work.	Experiential learning / engagement
Expectation of personal growth	I expect to learn something about myself during the exchange.	Reflexivity / self-awareness
Need for support	I feel that I currently need additional support in new situations.	the need for security / facilitator attention

AFTER THE EXCHANGE		
Question/statement | scale: 😟 1 – 😐 2 – 🙂 3 – 😊 4 – 🤩 5		Indicator
Emotional state after the programme	My emotional state after the exchange is more stable than before.	emotional well-being / self-regulation
Sense of belonging	I felt included and part of the group.	Social connection
Cooperation and communication (NFL objective)	I have developed better cooperation and communication skills.	interpersonal skills
Resilience and adaptation	I cope with unforeseen situations more easily than before.	resilience / adaptability
Nature as a resource	Spending time in nature helped me feel calmer and more present.	stress regulation / mindfulness in nature
Active participation	I actively participated in the activities in a way that suits me.	participation / inclusion
Self-confidence	I feel more self-confident after the exchange.	personal development / competence
Experiential learning (Kolb cycle)	I can apply what I have learned from experience in my daily life.	transfer of learning / active experimentation
Reflection and self-awareness	I better understand my reactions, needs, and behaviour.	reflective learning
Overall value of the experience	This experience has had a positive impact on me.	general well-being / impact

3.1.3. Evaluation and Youthpass reflection

Programme evaluation → valuable support also for the process of creating Youthpass certificates

Youthpass reflection should not be an activity reserved only for the final day of the programme. It is much more useful to create space for short reflective moments throughout the entire exchange, so that participants gradually become aware of their own learning and competence development.

This can be implemented through simple and informal methods such as:

- **Competence wall** – a poster with key Youthpass competences where participants stick notes with examples of their own learning and experiences during the programme
- **Reflection corner –** a space where participants can write down a thought, impression, or lesson learned after an activity
- Sticky notes – short answers to questions like "What did I learn today?" or "What am I proud of today?"
- **Learning diary** – personal notes kept by participants during the programme
- **Short reflection circles** – a few minutes at the end of the day to become aware of experiences and learning

Example of a final evaluation questionnaire linked to Youthpass competences

Instructions for participants: Assess to what extent you agree with the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5:

😟 *1 = strongly disagree*
😕 *2 = mostly disagree*
😐 *3 = neither agree nor disagree*
🙂 *4 = mostly agree*
😊 *5 = strongly agree*

Statement	Competence
I understand my own strengths and areas for development better.	Personal, social and learning to learn competence
During the exchange, I learned something new through my own experience.	Learning to learn competence
I feel more confident in expressing my ideas and opinions.	Literacy and communication competences
I cooperate more easily with people of different backgrounds and cultures.	Citizenship competence
I actively participated in group decisions and activities.	Citizenship competence
I developed greater responsibility for my own participation and learning.	Personal and social competence
I learned to solve problems and adapt to new situations better.	Entrepreneurship competence
Spending time in nature helped me understand the importance of caring for the environment.	Sustainability competence
I gained new knowledge or skills that I can use in my daily life.	Learning to learn competence
After the exchange, I feel more prepared to face challenges and changes.	Personal, social and learning to learn competence

Final Youthpass reflection

Final Youthpass reflection

Alongside the numerical evaluation, it is recommended to add a few short questions:

- What did I learn about myself during this exchange?
- Which new skill or competence did I develop the most?
- In what way can the experience of spending time in nature be useful to me in daily life?
- Which moment of the exchange remained particularly significant to me and why?
- What do I want to apply after returning home?
- If I were to describe my experience in one sentence, it would be:

Do not view Youthpass as a document to be completed at the end of the project. When reflection becomes a part of the daily programme, it is much easier for participants to recognise their own learning, and the final completion of the Youthpass certificate becomes a natural continuation of the process that took place throughout the entire exchange.

3.2. Tips for maintaining results

Maintaining results after the exchange is an important part of project sustainability. Sustainability does not only refer to the duration of activities or the continuation of cooperation among partners. It primarily refers to what remains after the project ends – what changes, knowledge, experiences, methods, and relationships continue to live on even after the final day of the exchange.

In addition to learning and development, project results play an important role in final reporting, documenting impacts, and transparently presenting achieved results to partners, funders, and the wider community.

For projects involving time spent in nature, mental well-being, and non-formal learning, sustainability is often manifested through small but long-term significant changes. These can be new habits, a different way of coping with stress, a greater connection with nature, continued participation in youth activities, or the application of learned methods in daily work and life.

FACILITATOR REFLECTION TOOL

Remember:
Sustainability is not created on the final day of the project. It is built throughout the entire process – through involving young people in decision-making, creating meaningful experiences, reflection, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity for participants to recognise the personal value of what they have experienced and learned.

Ask yourself:
How can we help young people transfer the experiences, knowledge, and skills gained during the exchange into their daily lives?

Create:
A support package that leaves room for different paces of integrating what has been learned.

With the end of the exchange, the learning process does not stop; instead, that is when the connection of experiences and reflection begins. While some participants immediately recognise what they have learned, others need more time to become aware of the changes.

Maintaining results does not mean keeping the same intensity of the experience, but creating opportunities for further reflection. It is important for participants to recognise their own development and find ways to apply what they have learned in daily life, education, or work.

How to support the maintenance of results after the exchange?

- Encourage participants to recognise what they want to take with them from the experience.
- Provide space for final reflection and personal conclusions.
- Encourage the setting of small and realistic personal goals after the project.
- Maintain contact through informal online meetings or the group's communication channels.
- Encourage participants to share the gained knowledge and experiences within their local communities.
- Encourage involvement in new local or international activities.

The facilitator monitors:

- whether participants recognise their own progress and lessons learned
- whether they can connect the exchange experience with daily life
- whether they feel motivated for further involvement and action
- whether there are participants who need additional support after an intense exchange experience

Different forms of support will suit different participants after the programme ends:

- **For participants who prefer structured plans and concrete steps →** personal action plans, goal setting, or agreed steps they want to apply upon returning home
- **For participants who prefer a gradual integration of the experience →** occasional reminders, follow-up online meetings, or the opportunity to return to the experience after some time through reflection
- **For participants to whom a sense of connectedness is particularly important →** continued contact with the group, peer support, and informal exchange of experiences

Keep in mind that the effects of non-formal learning are often visible only weeks or months after the exchange through changes in behaviour, decisions, and relationships. A new perspective and a sense of belonging bring long-term results that become clear only with the passage of time.

Micro-example from practice:

After the exchange ends, a participant might not immediately know what they have specifically learned. However, a few months later, they may notice that they integrate into new groups more easily, take on responsibility more independently, or handle uncertain situations with greater confidence. Such shifts represent valuable long-term effects of the programme.

3.3. Sharing, visibility and use of results

One of the values of Erasmus+ projects is not only what participants learn during the activity, but also the way in which the gained experiences, knowledge, methods and inspiration are passed on and used after the project ends.

How can the experience gained during the exchange be useful and inspiring to other young people, organisations and communities?

Sharing results should therefore not be viewed as an obligation that comes at the end of the project, but as a natural continuation of the learning and development process, and an opportunity for participants to become aware of their own achievements and contribution to the community.

3.3.1. Documenting Experiences

Recording experiences is an important part of the learning process. Documentation preserves memories but also helps with project visibility, participant reflection, and the recognition of achieved learning outcomes.

Possible ways of documenting include:

- photos and video recordings of activities
- digital diaries, blogs, or short reflective entries by participants
- creative forms such as drawings, photo stories, presentations, or short videos
- collecting learning examples and personal experiences for Youthpass reflection
- documenting developed methods, materials, and examples of good practice

The facilitator monitors:

- whether different phases of the process are documented, and not just the final results
- whether participants have the opportunity to actively participate in documenting the experience
- whether the documented content authentically reflects the participants' experience

3.3.2. Dissemination and Visibility

Sharing results allows the project's impact to extend beyond the participant group itself, contributing to local communities, organisations and other young people.
When young people have the opportunity to present their experience to others, they often become more aware of their own learning, develop a sense of achievement and recognise the value of their contribution.

Participants can be involved through:

- presenting experiences to peers
- preparing photos, videos and social media posts
- creating promotional or educational materials
- participating in local events and workshops
- sharing personal stories, reflections and lessons learned

Participants do not have to contribute in the same way – some will prefer public speaking, while others will write, take photos or organise. Diverse ways of involvement increase motivation and yield higher quality results.

The facilitator monitors:

- whether participants understand why sharing results is important
- whether they feel included in the dissemination process
- whether they have the opportunity to participate in a way that matches their interests and competences
- whether the results are presented authentically and in line with the participants' actual experience

The method of sharing results will depend on the project goals, target groups and the organisation's capacities. It is important to consider to whom the experiences, methods and lessons learned should be transferred, and at which level the project's impact is to be achieved.

Promotion and sharing of results can take place at different levels:

Local level

- presentations in schools, associations and youth centres
- local events and workshops
- exhibitions of photographs, creative works or project results
- community activities that transfer the methods and experiences learned
- cooperation with local media

National level

- cooperation with networks of youth organisations
- presentation of examples of good practice
- participation in conferences, seminars and professional events
- publication of results through organisational channels and national media

European level

- sharing results via Erasmus+ networks and platforms
- connecting with organisations from other countries
- presenting developed methods and tools to an international audience
- exchange of experiences with partner organisations
- development of new international cooperations and projects

Dissemination is not just promotion, but the transfer of experiences and methods to other young people and communities. The focus should not be on the number of posts, but on whether the results are understandable, useful and inspiring to others.

3.3.3. Use of results after the project

The value of the project increases when the results – experiences gained, methods developed and lessons learned – continue to be used even after the activity has ended and become a source of learning for future programmes, organisations and participants. **This can include:**

- applying learned methods in future projects and activities
- sharing knowledge and experiences with other young people
- using developed materials, tools and publications
- involving participants in new local and international initiatives
- continuing cooperation among partner organisations
- transferring successful practices to other organisations and communities

The facilitator monitors:

- whether participants recognise how they can apply what they have learned after the project
- whether there are opportunities for further involvement of young people
- whether the developed tools and methods are used even after the activity has ended
- whether established cooperations continue after the project is completed

The feedback collected, project documentation and participants' experiences can serve as a valuable foundation for developing new project ideas, improving working methods and planning future Erasmus+ activities.

It is worth taking time to reflect on:

•• what worked particularly well during the project
• which activities, methods or organisational solutions would be beneficial to improve
• which good practices are worth transferring to future projects
• how to make the developed materials, tools and experiences available to other young people and organizations

When experiences, methods and lessons learned continue to be used after the project has ended, the impact of the exchange becomes a foundation for new initiatives, cooperations and opportunities for young people.

Micro-example from practice

After the exchange, a group of young people organised a short event in their local community where they presented their experiences of being in nature, photos of the activities and the methods they used during the project. Although the event was not large, several new young people became interested in participating in future international projects, allowing the impact of the exchange to live on even after its completion.

CONCLUSION

The mental health of young people is facing significant challenges today. Returning to nature and learning through experience is not a romantic ideal – it is a necessity. This handbook has been developed from the belief that this return does not have to be complicated. With practical tools, careful preparation and a little confidence, every youth worker can create a space in which young people can build resilience, strengthen connections and rediscover a sense of inner calm.

Planning a youth exchange begins long before the first day of the programme. Clearly defined objectives, a carefully considered choice of location and open conversations about the needs of the group are not bureaucratic steps –they are the foundations on which everything else is built. Checklists and planning tables are useful reminders, but genuine safety and inclusion are created through a culture of support and mutual respect, not through completed forms.

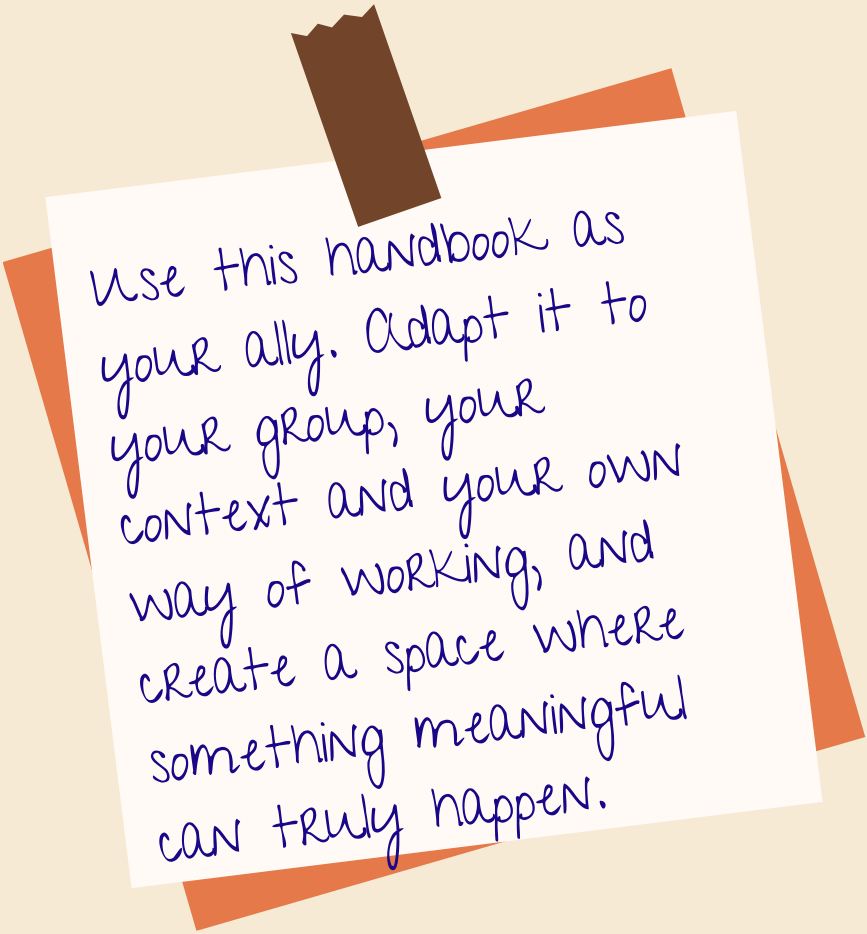
Learning in nature is not a linear process – it is a cyclical journey from action to reflection, from understanding to application. For this journey of experiential learning to take place, young people cannot be passive observers. When they are involved from the very beginning, when the group establishes its own shared agreements and consciously builds psychological safety, the unpredictability of nature ceases to be a source of anxiety and becomes a shared resource.

Outdoor activities achieve their full potential when the experience becomes more than simply something that happened. Through reflection and dialogue, it becomes something that participants carry with them long after the programme has ended. The facilitator's role is not simply to deliver the programme, but to create a framework that values equally those who learn through discussion and those who need silence – without pressure, without judgement and with space to make mistakes.

Nature-based non-formal learning methods, such as solving real-life challenges, practical workshops and reflective dialogue, are effective because they are rooted in authentic experience. When we remove unnecessary pressure and allow real situations to unfold naturally, young people begin to develop communication skills, empathy and self-confidence in a genuine way. Small moments – such as normalising mistakes, sharing a moment of silence in a reflection circle or preparing and enjoying a meal together – can sometimes leave a deeper impression than the most carefully planned activity.

Inclusion and safety are not separate tasks that can be addressed through a checklist. They are reflected in every small facilitation decision: the way questions are asked, the way discomfort is acknowledged, and the way space is created for choice. When good physical preparation is combined with a culture of support and clearly defined boundaries, the unpredictability of nature becomes a shared responsibility rather than a source of fear.

Finally, evaluation and dissemination are not simply administrative requirements – they are the stage at which a project becomes visible. By observing how participants develop, helping them recognise what they have learned, and sharing the outcomes more widely, you complete the cycle that began on the first day of the youth exchange. What has been learned does not remain within the project itself. It is carried into communities, future projects and the everyday practice of youth workers for many years to come.



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